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MARILYNNE ROBINSON

'Secularism'  
has no meaning

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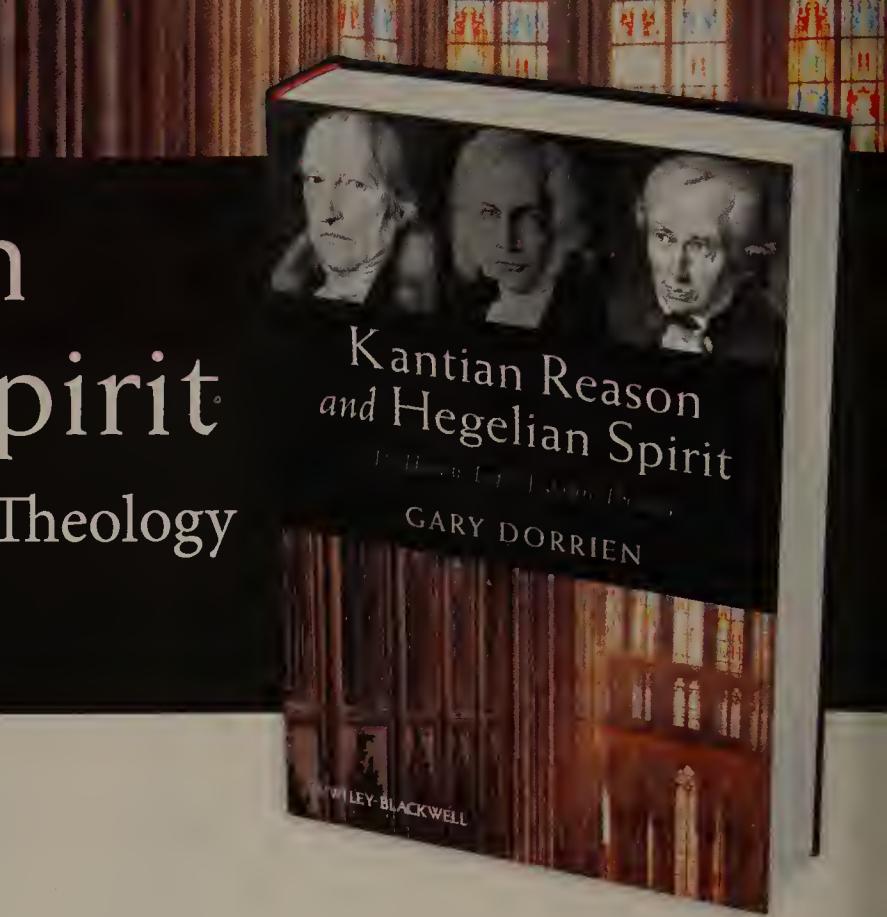
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## Communion thirst

**WHEN JESUS TOLD** his disciples that unless they became like children they would not qualify for entrance to the kingdom, he didn't mean childishness. They had just asked a very adult question, a typically human question about status and privilege: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" His response, "Become like children," has to do with the human propensity to make simple matters unnecessarily complex, to pile guidelines, rules, and hoary traditions on top of simple truths until they're no longer visible or recognizable.

I was delivering the homily during mass in the Roman Catholic church where my daughter-in-law and three granddaughters are members and my son attends and participates. The girls go to the church's parochial school. My wife and I attend for Christmas pageants, school programs, and first communions. The parish priest and I have become friends, and he often jokes about hiring me to be his assistant. On the day I preached, several pews were filled with other family members, Presbyterians all. Two granddaughters served as altar girls and rang the bells during the Eucharist at the moment of transubstantiation, which was a personal high point for them and for all the Presbyterians. When Lilly finished she looked out at her family and executed a perfect fist pump, just as she does when she scores a soccer goal. I think Jesus would have liked that.

Then came the moment Protestants dread. Should we go forward to receive the elements? I always have the same internal discussion. Should I show my respect for my Catholic neighbors' traditions and abstain? Should I stay seated because I don't ordinarily go to dinners to which I've not been invited? Or should I participate because I believe that it is Jesus' table and no one should be excluded?

I looked to see what my family would do. Some remained seated. But my granddaughter Rachel, who has Down syndrome, and who is a member in good standing in her Presby-

terian church and regularly receives the sacrament, didn't hesitate. She hasn't heard about the 500 years of conflict over "the real presence." She stood and stepped toward the aisle, followed by her sister, mother, cousin, and grandmother (my wife).

I got up and fell in line behind Rachel. When she received the wafer—not the Presbyterian Wonder Bread cube—she had a little difficulty, so she took a large gulp from the cup that was lifted to her lips. There were two communion stations, and Rachel walked to the second and had another drink. My heart soared. Once again Rachel had gone to the heart of the matter, skimming over 20 centuries of ecclesiastical complexity to join the gathered friends of Jesus at his table.

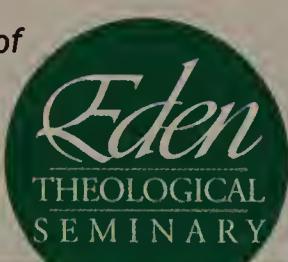
In this issue Sarah Hinlicky Wilson and Thomas Albert Howard remind us that the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is coming soon, and they offer valuable suggestions for marking the occasion (p. 20). Recognize, they urge, that hostility and recrimination shaped confessional theology on both sides, so "disentangle the hostility." Examine how politics and personalities led to explosive results. The authors recall that Pope John Paul II wisely counseled that ecumenism must be based on forgiveness and reconciliation.

As I watched Father John leading the liturgy of the mass, I was impressed by how the mass is part of my heritage. I'm a thoroughgoing Presbyterian, but the catholicity of the church is a part of my theological and ecclesiastical tradition and my personal faith. As we prayed for the church that day, I prayed for the church's unity, for the day when all are welcome at the Lord's table, the day when the terms *Catholic* and *Protestant* are no longer necessary or relevant. The most appropriate way to celebrate what happened 500 years ago is to find a way to unite what has been separate for far too long.

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**Correction:** The June 10 editorial "Counting the faithful" mistakenly referred to the Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill as Evelyn Underwood. The editors apologize.

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## LETTERS

### In the beginning

Picking up on the longtime conflict between science and creation mentioned by Karl Giberson in "Cosmos from nothing?" (June 10), I would like to propose a different reading of the creation scriptures that perhaps can bring a little peace to both camps and encourage belief.

In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word *yom*, though often translated "day," can also be defined as "a period of time." It is significant that evening is placed first and morning second. Hebrew being a picture language, evening can signify "a closing of or ending of" and conversely morning the "beginning of or something new."

What happens between evening and morning? Is it not that night or darkness rules? Darkness can be equated in scripture with the "lack of knowledge or lack of connection with God." In other words, God is not going to reveal or give us understanding during this time of darkness when he creates.

So what is the picture we are left with? Six periods of time when God created, progressively, in secret.

Marigold Watson  
Atlanta, Ga.

Isaiah 31 says: "The Egyptians are men, /not god,/ Their horses are flesh, not spirit." Isaiah saw the distinction between the world of objects and the world of subjects, which is at the heart of the religion-science debate. The biblical characterization of creation does not represent the cosmos as we see it, but rather the mythic view of the world as the Israelites of sixth-century BCE Babylon saw it: "the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth."

Genesis 1 is a revision of the Babylonian story of creation. It has no relationship to the Big Bang. I have no reason to doubt evolution or other scientific findings. There is no legitimate debate between science and biblical faith. They are two different realms.

Howard H. Cox  
Bethlehem, Pa.

Giberson writes: "It's clear by now that these scientific questions have deep theological overtones." Some posit that, since both theologians and cosmologists are asking where this universe came from, we can ignore the immense chasm between them. Theologians claim to know the answer to the question, which does not need confirming evidence because it will not allow disconfirming evidence. God did it, they would say; how God did it is a detail scientists can work out for us.

That is utterly other than how a cosmologist works. There can be no "mystery" to which causation is assigned. The rules of science don't allow bumping up against a limit to our knowledge and jumping to a divine explanation. Cosmologists and theologians are not doing the same thing, any more than faith healers and physicians are doing the same thing.

Steve Sittig  
San Dimas, Calif.

### Counting the faithful . . .

The June 10 editorial "Counting the faithful" reflects the widespread worry over the decline in church attendance and participation—particularly of the young—and the rise of the nones.

But this is not just a church problem, it is a problem of social capital in general. In *The Great Degeneration*, Niall Ferguson cites Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* for a list of such indicators: attendance at public meetings on town or school affairs down 35 percent; service as an officer of a club or organization down 42 percent; membership of parent-teacher associations down 61 percent; even membership in men's bowling leagues is down 73 percent.

Some statistics actually make the church look rather good in the context. What is failing is not just the church but all of American society.

Ralph E. Nelson  
Helena, Mont.

July 8, 2015

## Local transformations

Last month, police in the north Dallas suburb of McKinney were called to a pool party involving white and black youths. In a video of the scene that went viral, a white police officer is shown shoving a 14-year-old black girl to the ground, using his knees to pin her there, and then pointing his gun at and cursing other youths. It seemed like a movie shown too many times before—one in which white police officers use excessive force on unarmed people of color.

Lethal incidents in Ferguson, Baltimore, Staten Island, and elsewhere have prompted a national conversation on race and policing—but more is needed than a conversation. What's needed is a spiritual and political transformation. That transformation is most likely to come from local efforts rather than national strategies.

In the wake of the incident in McKinney, a local network of pastors known as the McKinney Shepherds quickly went to work to connect educators, police, and government officials. The group, which already had been talking about issues of race, organized prayer sessions and meetings with people of all races. Pastors met with the mayor and police chief to express their frustrations, and officials promised a candid investigation of the incident. About 100 pastors met at the McKinney Police Department to pray for their community and the police.

Churches can be catalysts for justice and reconciliation. That's a role they've assumed not only in the racially mixed suburb of McKinney but in the small Indiana city of Goshen, at one time a sundown community, a place where black people weren't welcome after dark. Aware of that history, the city council recently passed a resolution condemning behaviors of the past and promising to be a more welcoming city.

For Goshen, being more welcoming these days means responding to the large influx of Hispanic people who have come to the city looking for work. Led by the ministers' association, a community relations committee was formed to gather representatives of churches, businesses, and government. Its goal is to celebrate diversity and make sure that housing, educational, and medical resources are available to all.

The local police department has also been proactive in working with the minority community. As part of that effort, the police called a meeting at a middle school to address Hispanics' concerns. Only a few people showed up. The police discovered afterward that people had stayed away for fear that the meeting was a pretext for rounding up and deporting the undocumented.

The police changed their strategy and began holding meetings in Latino churches. Among other things, the police explained how they would and would not enforce immigration laws.

In such ways, churches, police, and civic institutions can work to build trust and to make the kind of change in behavior and attitude that endures.

**Congregations can be catalysts for racial justice and reconciliation.**

# CENTURY marks

**LOST OPPORTUNITY:** Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, remembers Vincent Harding coming up to him at a church in Denver and suggesting that they work together. Patel declined, saying he thought the mission of his own organization didn't mesh with Harding's. After Harding died, Patel read his obituary and learned Harding was an unsung hero of the civil rights movement and a speechwriter for Martin Luther King Jr. Later, at an event attended by Patel and Harding's widow Aljosie, Patel confessed that he had passed up a great opportunity. Aljosie said to Patel: "You should know that Vincent fol-

lowed your work, and he loved you, and he forgives you" (OnBeing.org, June 9).

**CURIOS CHILD:** As a child Richard Feynman once asked his father why a ball went to the back of a wagon when he pulled the wagon forward. His father said it was inertia. When Feynman asked what inertia was, his father said it is the name scientists give to the movement of a ball to the back of a wagon, but in truth no one really knows what it is. Feynman went on to get degrees at MIT and Princeton, and he won a Nobel Prize in physics. He attributed his success in science to the curiosity engendered by that

conversation with his father. The simplest questions can carry us to the edge of knowledge, and that's where he wanted to play (TED Radio Hour, June 12).

**LOVE AND LOSS:** Danielle Snyderman, a geriatrician, says it isn't possible to work successfully with an elderly patient without knowing about that person's relationship with his or her spouse. This awareness led her to start collecting stories about the love lives of the couples she was working with. These stories are "packed with humor, history, wisdom, and grace. Who wouldn't feel better after bearing witness to love that has weathered child-rearing, war, poverty, financial success, and physical decline?" Couples have difficulty addressing one question: "How do you anticipate a time without each other?" (Philadelphia Inquirer, June 14).

## PRAYERS for AGNOSTICS

Heavenly whatever,  
On the off chance  
that you're there:



To the powers  
that might or  
might not be:



Sorry in advance  
for being so bad at  
believing, but:



**SLIP UP:** Anne Lamott has been criticized for a Twitter comment she made about transgender Caitlyn (formerly Bruce) Jenner. She confessed to being "a tiny bit tired of Caitlyn" and repeatedly used male pronouns to describe Jenner. Lamott added that she "will call him a she when the pee-pee is gone." One writer accused Lamott of being transphobic, and the *Daily Kos* said she was bigoted. Lamott later apologized to transgender people and the parents of transgender children. RNS commentator Jonathan Merritt responded that "a couple of ignorant comments do not erase Lamott's long history of defending marginalized people. And they certainly do not turn her into a transphobic bigot" (RNS).

**CHILD PREACHERS:** No one knows how many child preachers there are in Brazil, but estimates run to the thou-

sands. Most of them are Pentecostal. Alani is an 11-year-old who, according to her father, performed her first healing miracle when she was only 51 days old. Convinced that Alani had healing powers, her father placed her infant hand on a woman's distended stomach—and it immediately deflated. Even within Pentecostal circles, some observers believe that child preachers like Alani are exploited by their parents and other adults (*New York Times*, June 11).

**END OF THE CHURCH?** A statistical projection is not a prediction, but if the number of Christians in Britain continues to decline at the current rate, there will be no more British Christians by 2067. Between 2001 and 2011 the church lost 5.3 million members—about 10,000 each week. The rate of decline in the Church of England is higher than that of other denominations. In one survey the numbers dropped from 40 percent of the population in 1983 to 29 percent in 2004 and just 17 percent last year. The decline in the Catholic Church is not as precipitous because of the influx of Catholic immigrants. Sometime in this century Muslims will outnumber Christians in Britain (*Spectator*, June 13).

**HOMICIDE CONTROL:** Research done at the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research shows that a Connecticut law enacted in 1995 has reduced gun homicides by as much as 40 percent. The law mandates that all potential gun buyers apply for a permit in person with the police, even if the seller is a licensed dealer. The legal age for purchasing a gun was raised from 18 to 21. Prospective gun buyers must also complete at least eight hours of training in handgun safety (*Connecticut Mirror*, June 11).

**READING RX:** The entrance to the library at Thebes bore the inscription, "Healing place for the soul." Freud suggested books to his patients, and the contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton was encouraged to start a bibliotherapy clinic that would suggest readings to people to make them better persons or help them cope with crises. While there is ongoing debate on whether fiction makes readers more empathetic, there is

**"We must begin with our daily lives if we want to change lifestyles, aware that our small gestures can guarantee sustainability and the future of the human family."**

— Pope Francis in a speech one week before the release of a papal encyclical on the environment, which is expected to push religious people to make climate change a galvanizing concern [RNS]

**"The church has gotten it wrong a few times on science, and I think we probably are better off leaving science to the scientists and focusing on what we're good at, which is theology and morality."**

— Rick Santorum, a devout Catholic and contender for the Republican presidential nomination, criticizing Pope Francis for speaking out on global warming (*Guardian*, June 13)

evidence that "regular readers sleep better, have lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression than non-readers" (*New Yorker*, June 9).

**PASTOR AND SPIRITS:** Christopher Thoma is an Evangelical Lutheran pastor in Michigan who blogs about his love of Scotch whisky at [www.angelsportion.com](http://www.angelsportion.com). A collection of these blogs has been published in a book, *The Angels' Portion: A Clergyman's Whisky Narrative*. He bought his first whisky at a shop in London. The owner let him taste samples of whisky, and he walked out with a \$500 bottle of William Grant & Sons, a special 25-year release.

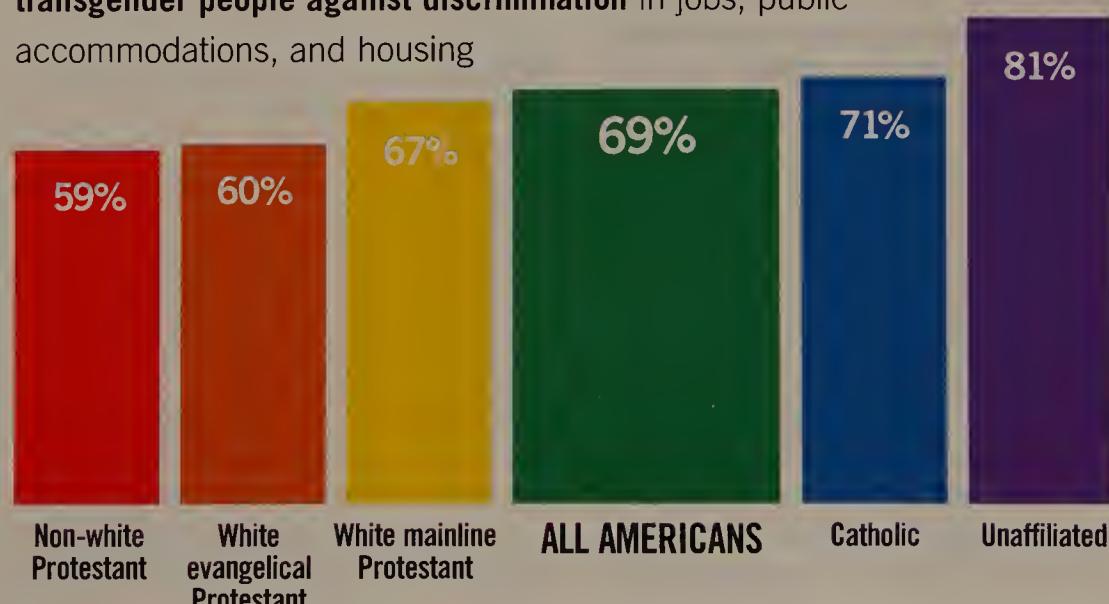
Thoma's reviews have a narrative shape to them, including family stories, experiences as a pastor, and references to history and literature (*Livingston Daily Press & Argus*, May 18).

**BIKER PRIEST:** Lou Vallone, a Catholic priest in western Pennsylvania, is a master scuba diver and a self-proclaimed barbecue expert. His favorite activity is riding his Harley Davidson motorcycle. Two hours on the bike is better than a three-day vacation, he claims. His diocese is wary of his biking avocation, but his parishioners are supportive. Vallone uses his biking experiences in his homilies (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 27).

## PROTECTION FOR LGBT?

SOURCE: PRRI

Percent who favor laws that would protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people against discrimination in jobs, public accommodations, and housing



Fiction writer Ron Rash

# Countering the darkness

*AS A POET, novelist, and short story writer, Ron Rash tells haunting tales of the American South, particularly of the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains. While his stories are stark, they hint at larger mysteries and marvel at the human capacity for wonder in the midst of suffering. His most recent collection of stories is *Something Rich and Strange* (see the review on p. 35).*

**Your stories often exist on the border between realism and wonder. Do you think of yourself as a realist writer?**

I am commenting on real conditions, both past and present, not so much as an advocate, but as a witness. That's the way I hope my work comes across. Yet wonder is a part of human reality as well.

#### **What inspired your first story?**

Unlike a lot of my writer friends who started writing early, I didn't try it out until I was in college. The first story was about my uncle, a man who had come to a serious time in his life, who had lost his family and his job.

**Some of your stories are breathtaking in their violence, and yet the overall effect is not depressing. How is that?**

In fiction, as in real life, a person's character is often best revealed in extreme situations. If people read me to be titillated by violence, then I have failed, because violence is just a means to understand my characters better.

My hope is that the pleasure of the language helps counter the darkness. That's what makes Cormac McCarthy's works or a play like *King Lear* bearable. Even in the midst of darkness, something beautiful is being transmitted.

I believe that most of my characters

do the best they can with the hands they've been dealt. I am not a cynic. I am not a nihilist. I hope I show characters that the readers can recognize as being human, even in extreme circumstances.

**We've been talking about the realism of your work, but myth and archetype are also present.**

I hope my work can be read on multiple levels. For example, *Serena* is a realistic novel depicting the North Carolina mountains during the Depression, but I was also hoping the reader would recognize a mythological level in it—references to Medea, for example. I am fascinated with Carl Jung's idea of the collective unconscious and the idea that we share certain stories deep in our consciousness.

**Are there certain myths that you draw on often?**

Yes, many of which are about people trying to leave their humanity behind them and the price of that to themselves and others, as in *Serena*.

**What are some of the other big questions at work in your writing?**

I am fascinated by the duality of human beings: the recognition of evil in the world but also the goodness. Evil always rises up. And yet there are always people who fight against it. I am fascinated by the war between what is best in our natures and what is worst.

I am also fascinated by the connection between the inner world of a person and that person's environment. Living in these mountains can work in two ways. There is a sense of being

PHOTO BY MARK HASKERT



protected by the mountains—almost womb-like; but they loom overhead and remind one of how small and fleeting human life is.

#### **Do you go to church?**

I go to a Presbyterian church. I grew up Southern Baptist. When I married my Presbyterian wife, I decided I would become a Presbyterian. I wrote to my Baptist church in North Carolina to release me, and they wouldn't do it. So I am still a Baptist, at least on paper, I guess. The Presbyterians seem OK with it. They let me take communion. They don't make me wear a scarlet B.

Church is important to me. I enjoy the quietness and the seriousness. I have always been a renegade in terms of orthodoxy. I am not a particularly good Presbyterian or a good Baptist. Probably the only statement I am comfortable in making about my relationship to religion is that there is something in me that yearns for transcendence. I have my doubts, plenty of them, but belief always seems to win out.

**Is there a story or novel that best expresses or reflects your own faith?**

The novel I just finished is about wonder. It is by far my most positive book. It is about the beauty of the world and our need to acknowledge it. But I would hope that the reader finds moments of wonder and transcendence in my other works.

—Amy Frykholm

# Perfume for my father

by David Warbrick

## OF ALL THE PRESENTS

I've ever given my father—the lavish art books, the magnificent antique easel we bought together for his studio, the cashmere, and the classical music—it was the small bottle of fragrant bath essence I gave him last Christmas that may be the most important gift of all. In his nursing home, where Parkinson's and dementia compete as likely causes of his demise, kind staff occasionally take him to the bathroom, lift his painfully thin frame into the warm water, and leave him and Mum in private so that she can help him bathe.

They live separately, and Dad's passivity and tiredness and frailty mean that there are always people, appliances, and medicines around them and interrupting them. The bath time is the most intimate time and touch possible for them. After 50 years of marriage my dad's hands—which once painted stunning pictures and caressed his wife—are so translucent that you can see all their workings. He draws in the air with them sometimes now. He has a tremor. Bath time allows him gentle, distant echoes of the power of his youthful touch. It's my parents' least mediated, least frustrating communication. It's a place where Mum can be wife instead of caregiver.

So a little fragrant extravagance seemed the most important gift I could give. It is likely to be his last Christmas gift. Such a transient gift admits that we are letting him go. We are preparing him and ourselves for his burial.

Even earlier in life, beautiful scent suggests human frailty, and eventual decay. Its fleeting beauty highlights both our aliveness and our brevity. In

that sense, perfume is always rather beautifully about death. After Lazarus is raised from the dead, Mary, immeasurably grateful for the gift of her brother's life, kneels at Jesus' feet for a third time. Earlier she sat listening to Jesus teach while Martha cooked. Then her brother died, and she fell at Jesus' feet in angry sorrow. Now she kneels again, this time to anoint him with daring, scandalous sensuality. Whether her

extravagant act like Mary's. While the world throws ugly things at us, peddling fear and cynicism, Mary firmly asserts the overwhelming priority of relationship with Jesus. As she breaks the jar, she breaks the power of Rome over her heart and mind.

Of course, her extravagance raises resentment. Many, like Judas, will make desperate claims. What about the poor? he asks. Jesus says, "You

## A small bottle of fragrant bath oil seemed the most important gift that I could give.

judgment is unwise is hardly the point. She has shown attentiveness on ordinary days, on tragic days, and now on a celebratory day. Jesus is grateful for the rich relationship.

We might contrast Mary with Nicodemus, who talked furtively by night with Jesus, but only came with the tender affirmation of perfume when it was too late, after Jesus had died. Many of us have had that stomach-sinking feeling of being too late. Too often we miss the chance to tell someone that he or she is loved or admired.

Mary makes the most of each moment. She doesn't waste a chance to be connected to Jesus, to honor him and to learn from him. She doesn't wait until it's too late, but admits with her tears and fragrance that Jesus' life is all too fleeting.

There's a radical political aspect to an

always have the poor with you," then highlights Judas's deep cynicism: you feign care about the poor because you are jealous of Mary's tenderness. You are jealous of her depth of feeling, trapped as you are in your isolated cynical little life.

The world is in desperate need of such lavish attentiveness as Mary shows with its admission of frailty and celebration of human beauty. Let's not wait to follow her example. Whether it's a day that brings regret, like Nicodemus coming too late with perfume, or a gloriously uncomplicated day of thanks, the fragrance of our gratitude for each other's gifts can banish meanness and jealousy from our neighborhood, our political conversation, our homes, and our relationships.



David Warbrick is vicar of All Saints Kings Heath Church (Church of England) in Kings Heath, England.

## Francis sets up abuse tribunal for bishops

Pope Francis has approved the first-ever system for judging and possibly deposing bishops who fail to protect children from abusive clerics, a major step in responding to Catholics who have been furious that guilty priests have been defrocked while bishops have largely escaped punishment.

The five-point plan on accountability for bishops originated with the special sexual abuse commission that Francis set up to deal with the ongoing crisis. After some modifications, his nine-member Council of Cardinals unanimously signed off on it, and Francis gave his final blessing to it on June 10.

"Very pleased the pope has approved the Commission's proposal on accountability," tweeted Marie Collins of Ireland, a survivor of sexual abuse, who sits on the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

Peter Saunders of England, the other survivor on the commission, also called the new system "good news," telling the Catholic news site Crux that "this is a positive step that clearly indicates that Pope Francis is listening to his commission."

Saunders's support is especially notable because he has said that if the pope did not institute a reliable system for holding bishops' feet to the fire, he would leave the panel.

Saunders is also currently embroiled in a verbal tussle with Cardinal George Pell, the pontiff's top financial reformer, whom Saunders has accused of being "almost sociopathic" in his handling of clergy sexual abuse when Pell served as a bishop in Australia.

The Vatican has defended Pell, a blunt-talking churchman, who is expected to return to Australia to testify before

a government commission investigating the church's abuse history.

Survivors' advocates in the United States, who for years led efforts to break the clerical wall of silence on abuse, took a much more skeptical stance on the new moves.

"Accountability necessarily involves consequences for wrongdoers," said David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "Whether a new, untested, Vatican-ruled process will mean consequences for wrongdoers remains to be seen."

The new system will give some people hope, Clohessy said.

"But hope doesn't safeguard kids," he said. "Punishing men who endanger kids safeguards kids. That should have happened decades ago. . . . That's not happening now. And that must happen—strongly and soon—if the church is to be safer."

A test for the new system might be a case in Minnesota, where a county attorney in early June filed criminal charges against the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The criminal charges were a first against an archdiocese and allege that church leaders failed to protect children from abuse by a cleric.

While the current head of the archdiocese, Archbishop John Nienstedt, was not charged, officials say he could be as the investigation proceeds. But whatever happens in that case, the record indicates that Nienstedt failed to take action against the priest as recently as 2012—which could violate church policies. Nienstedt and a top aide resigned June 15.

In a statement, the archbishop said he was stepping down "to give the Archdiocese a new beginning amidst the many challenges we face," adding, "I leave with a clear conscience."



**BISHOP ACCOUNTABILITY:** Pope Francis, who recently set up a tribunal for judging bishops accused of not protecting children and youth, listens to young people in Sarajevo, Bosnia, on June 6.

Until now, Catholic bishops have been answerable only directly to the pope, who has the sole power to appoint them and also to fire them.

But popes have been loath to depose bishops over shielding molesters, and the process for deposing a bishop was so murky that it was often easier for the Vatican to shuttle a bishop to a ceremonial post or wait for him to retire.

"The pope's decision to hold bishops accountable for mishandling sexual abuse cases is a long overdue and indispensable step in fighting abuse," said James Martin, an editor at the Jesuit weekly *America* and a widely followed commentator on church affairs.

In April, Bishop Robert Finn of Missouri, who three years earlier became the first bishop convicted of failing to report a priest suspected of child abuse, was forced to resign, effectively the first bishop in the decades-long crisis who lost his job for covering up for an abuser.

But Finn's resignation came only after years of outrage among Catholics and, in the end, lobbying by some fellow bishops, most notably Boston cardinal Sean O'Malley, a member of the pope's personal council of nine cardinals and head of the papal sexual abuse commission.

The commission was announced in December 2013 and officially created in March 2014. Apart from O'Malley, it currently has 17 members: ten laypeople (including two survivors of sexual abuse), five priests, and two nuns.

O'Malley has long backed a system for judging bishops who failed to stop abusive clerics, and this new system has the hallmarks of his approach.

The main feature of the new system will be a tribunal—effectively a church court—set up in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the powerful Vatican department that oversees orthodoxy and has also become the clearing-house for judging priests accused of abuse.

The new tribunal will "judge bishops with regard to crimes of the abuse of office when connected to the abuse of minors." The pope is expected to name a special prosecutor and a staff for the tribunal in the coming months, perhaps before late September, when he takes his first trip to the United States, which has

been ground zero in the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

Several gray areas remain. For example, the new protocols do not say who is responsible for reporting bishops to the Vatican and how such complaints will be filed and handled.

Still, Vatican observers say Francis has set up the new system quickly, given the glacial pace at which the Roman Curia usually operates. And he seems to want to go around many of the usual bureaucratic and canonical roadblocks to establish a relatively simple and independent tribunal. —David Gibson, Religion News Service

## Study finds Americans think well of churches, might even attend

Many Americans today don't think they have a place for church in their lives.

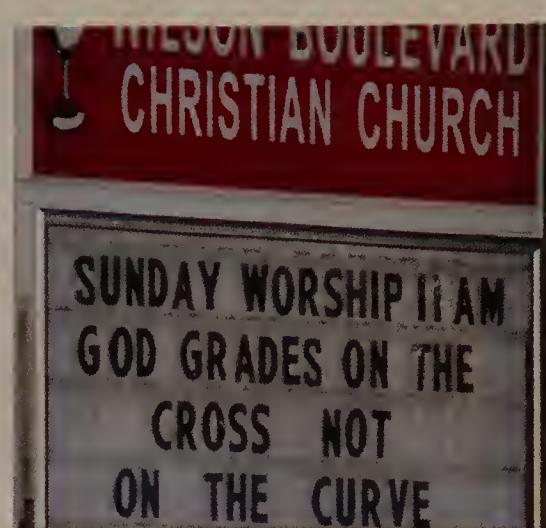
"But they believe the church has a place for them, when or if they are interested," said Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research, which issued a new survey in June on perceptions of religious denominations.

The findings show that as many as 45 percent of Americans look at the church brand on the sign out front—such as Catholic, Baptist, or Methodist—and drive past, thinking it is "not for me."

And yet, McConnell said, the survey reveals an openness in most people—if not a very theologically deep one—to stopping by, even if they declare no religious identity.

"Many people view a church like the ice cream parlor down the road," McConnell said. "They think, 'When I'm in the mood, I can go.' Church leaders can take it as good news: people haven't ruled them out. But they have to be a little unsettled at how little people are thinking about this."

The LifeWay survey, American Perceptions of Denominations, asked 1,000 U.S. adults last fall to give a favorable or unfavorable rating on nine traditions or to say they don't know enough to form an opinion.



**DRIVING BY:** A recent study shows that while many people in the United States rate denominations favorably, nearly half also agreed that when they look at a church sign, they "assume it is not for me."

Every group had a higher percentage of favorable than unfavorable ratings, and the largest groups led the way:

- Baptist—61 percent favorable
- Catholic—57 percent
- Nondenominational—53 percent
- Methodists—52 percent
- Southern Baptists—49 percent
- Presbyterian—46 percent
- Lutheran—46 percent
- Pentecostal—38 percent

However, 20 percent or more of respondents said they "don't know enough" about particular denominations to respond favorably or unfavorably. McConnell was surprised that this was true even among bigger denominations such as Catholics, the nation's largest. For smaller groups, "don't know enough" responses rose as high as 35 percent.

Unfavorable ratings ranged from 19 percent for Baptists to 27 percent for Pentecostals.

"Churches today are at a crossroads," McConnell said. "They are not declining today, but they are vulnerable."

"The buzzword now is 'revitalization.' The best way to change a brand is to change the meaning associated with a brand. You do that by appealing to what people care about. If a church is doing good things and bringing positive changes in people's lives and communities, that generates a favorable rating and response."

The landline and cell phone survey of 1,000 U.S. adults was conducted Septem-

ber 26 to October 5, 2014. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. The findings were released in time for the annual summer meetings of many Christian religious denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, which meets June 16 in Columbus, Ohio.

The SBC might take note: respondents looked less favorably on the specifically Southern Baptist choice than on Baptist in general, referring to any of the dozens of Baptist denominations, including the liberal American Baptists and the historically black National Baptists.

LifeWay also asked respondents whether, for each of the nine traditions, they agreed with the statement, "When I see a church named the following, I assume it is not for me."

Here, McConnell found a hopeful sign. According to the report, 40 to 48 percent of nones don't see themselves in the pews at these churches, but a "majority don't automatically exclude them."

Interfaith marriage might explain this. Although LifeWay's survey didn't ask about marital status, a Pew Research survey released in May on the changing landscape of U.S. religion found that 33 percent of U.S. adults who are married or living with a partner chose someone from another major religious tradition or no religion. —Cathy Lynn Grossman, Religion News Service

## Abuse of religious groups spurring Eritrea migrants, UN report says

Eritrea, a country in the Horn of Africa known for having the second-largest number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, after Syria, is committing serious religious freedom abuses, according to a UN investigation.

The religious abuses are among a host of widespread human rights violations that are forcing Eritrea's citizens to undertake deadly voyages to Europe through North Africa, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights said.

Islamic State militants who control



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**FLEEING FOR FREEDOM:** Migrants from Northeast Africa had their boat sent back by the Libyan navy to the coastal city of Misrata on May 3. Nearly 5,800 migrants were plucked from boats and ten bodies were recovered in less than 48 hours, Italy's coast guard said, in one of the biggest rescue operations this year.

parts of Libya have grabbed Christian migrants passing through the country and are posing the biggest danger to fleeing Eritreans.

Early this year, the militant group kidnapped and later killed 21 Egyptians and 28 Ethiopians.

The latest reports indicate that Islamic State fighters have kidnapped 88 Eritreans traveling with smugglers across Libya. The report details deaths, disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture, coercion, and forced conversions.

"They were coming from Eritrea, and they were escaping from a very difficult situation," said David Curry, Open Doors USA president, in a June 10 statement.

The Eritrean government recognizes only four religious groups: Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Sunni Muslims.

"All religious communities and their members are nevertheless to varying degrees targeted by restrictions and attacks by the government," the UN said.

Interference in religious affairs is rampant, with religious materials often confiscated.

The Eritrean government dismissed the report as unfounded and devoid of merit. —Fredrick Nzwili, Religion News Service

## Arizona ministers use sermon series to critique 'progressive' faith

When eight pastors in Fountain Hills, Arizona, were planning a joint sermon series called "'Progressive' Christianity: Fact or Fiction?" they didn't invite a local pastor who had cowritten a curriculum on the topic.

"You'd think if they want to do a series on progressive Christianity, they'd want the guy who has written a DVD curriculum on it," said David Felten, who is coauthor of *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*. "That indicates to me that it's not just a broad concern, but aimed at us"—him and his congregation, the Fountains, a United Methodist church.

The May and June sermon series in the town of 22,500 caught the attention of national media, as well as pastors in the region and Christian leaders nationally and internationally who have signed an open letter expressing concerns about the series. Congregations taking part include Baptist, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and nondenominational congregations.

Bill Good, pastor of the Fountain Hills Presbyterian Church and current president of the local ministerial association, said the sermon series compared progressive Christianity to biblical, traditional, and orthodox Christianity.

Good's sermon, "Why Does It Matter That the Bible Is Reliable?" includes video of Fred Plumer, president of ProgressiveChristianity.org and a Jesus Seminar participant, speaking about the process by which the Bible was put together over centuries. According to an audio recording on the church website, Plumer said of the Bible, "We certainly do not see this as the Word of God, even in the sense of being inspired so intently that it retains the sense of authority that it came from God."

Good disagrees. He calls the Bible "the inspired Word of God" and "our rule for faith and life," he preached.

The ministerial association didn't invite Felten to present his views "because that wasn't the medium we were working with," Good told the CENTURY. It was a sermon series rather than a forum, and "we felt in some ways that we were entering into dialogue" by using the videos as part of the sermons.

"I doubt that progressive Christianity is any more uniform in its theology . . . than those who would describe themselves as traditional or orthodox," Good said. "Look at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example."

For Felten the sermon series points to theological diversity among Christians.

"I think progressive Christianity is the belief of many in the mainline, and it has been for 80 [or] 90 years," he said.

Members of the Fountains have noted that they meet people in the grocery store and at their children's schools who attend the churches holding the sermon series.

"That's where I get sad, because I know this is affecting friendships and relationships in town," Felten said. "I'm just wondering what the further repercussions will be."

Felten's relationships with the pastors of the ministerial association changed two years ago during planning for the ecumenical Easter sunrise service. Good and Felten had a conversation about a newspaper article in which Felten made

comments about the resurrection of Jesus being metaphorical.

"What I recall saying to him was, David, if I believed what you do, I don't know that I'd be eager to get up early on Sunday because I don't know what we'd be celebrating," Good said.

Felten heard that he wasn't meeting the "measure of orthodoxy" of the association's other ministers.

Then or now, the ministerial association has no creed or pledge that members are expected to agree to, Good said.

**C**ystal Steinberg, a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, previously served in Fountain Hills. When she arrived in 2010, she was invited to a ministerial association meeting, but when the other pastors saw her enter the room—she was the only woman



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FOUNTAINS

**SERMON SERIES:** Eight pastors in Fountain Hills, Arizona, held a joint sermon series in May and June, promoted by these banners in front of their churches. The series generated national media attention and an open letter from clergy in response.

present—they turned around in their chairs rather than standing up to introduce themselves. The ministerial association made it clear that "it wasn't a place for gathering and dreaming together about what we could do," she said.

Steinberg now lives in Wisconsin, but she saw what the pastors wrote about the sermon series, including the comment that "there is a great deal of confusion regarding the extreme differences between what some call 'Progressive Christianity' and true biblical Christianity."

Steinberg got to know members of those pastors' churches when some of them volunteered for an ecumenical ministry coordinated by the ELCA con-

gregation—with support from the local Catholic church, which is also not part of the ministerial association—to provide meals for those in need.

"I didn't experience the people of Fountain Hills to be confused in any way," she said. "I found the people there to be reflective, interested in dialogue and conversation. I think it's unfortunate that their openness could be labeled as confusion."

Even if they were confused, she wondered, how would a sermon series address their confusion?

"When do the people get to ask questions in a sermon series?" she said. "If they were in the community center hosting a dialogue . . . I could see that being inspiring and engaging to people."

No longer participating in the ministerial association, Felten and Steinberg strengthened connections with groups from other faiths, including through an interfaith Thanksgiving service that was already happening annually. (The ministerial association members' churches host a separate, Christian Thanksgiving event.) The Fountains is a multifaith campus: a Reform Jewish congregation and a Buddhist group meet in the building. The congregation has also held forums with local Muslims, and church members were part of the peaceful response to the recent armed protest rally outside a Phoenix mosque.

After hearing about the sermon series, several pastors from the PCUSA Presbytery of the Grand Canyon, to which Good's congregation belongs, organized an open letter.

"We celebrate and appreciate a healthy tension between conservative, progressive, and other understandings of God, Jesus, and the Bible," the letter states. "We believe we are all better together than apart and seek to build bridges of understanding and mutual respect."

Peggy Roberts, a pastor in Phoenix, said letter organizers initially sought signers within the presbytery, but the effort grew nationally and internationally, among Presbyterians and others. They responded publicly since the sermon series was public, she said.

"We're saddened by the whole tone of the debate, and we wanted to clarify that

he [Good] does not represent us or, we feel, the diversity of expressions found not only in the Christian faith but in the Presbyterian tradition," she said. "We hope to be in conversation with the churches and the pastors in some way in hopes that we can get past this divisive point."

Eric Ledermann, pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Tempe, Arizona, who drafted the letter, spoke with Good after the sermon series began. They reached no agreement, other than that they would pray for each other.

Good said he wished that Ledermann or some of the other pastors in the presbytery had called him after hearing news reports that characterized the sermon series as a "faith fight." "I wish I had been asked, is this really what's going on out there?" Good said.

The open letter had more than 200 signatures as of mid-June, with Ledermann hearing from moderate and conservative church leaders who disagreed with the way the sermon series was conducted. "We've hit a chord," Ledermann said. —Celeste Kennel-Shank, the CHRISTIAN CENTURY

out of conviction and aren't afraid. Pastors in China are concerned, however, that the activity in Zhejiang is a prelude to a larger crackdown.

The recent pushback began in May after the provincial government announced that crosses must come off all churches in the province. That brought a rare open letter from the region's largest evangelical church stating that the policy is "likely to cause chaos . . . and religious conflicts."

Zan Aizong, a local evangelical, said in a telephone interview that "the churches are restoring their cross over and over again. . . . They are being bold and very courageous."

**S**ince December 2013, police in Zhejiang have stripped crosses from more than 450 churches, according to China Aid, a Texas-based Christian human rights monitor. Police with large cranes have often shown up with no warning. They have demolished prominent sanctuaries, including the \$5 million Sanjiang Church in Wenzhou just as it was completing construction.

Unlike previous campaigns that lasted a few months, the current "three rectifications and one demolition" policy has lasted at least two years. It has been part of a media campaign aimed at churches and now includes the infiltration of congregations in Wenzhou in the attempt to discover party members and their families who worship. In the Communist Party state, being both Christian and a party member is not allowed.

Authorities in Zhejiang have not given an explanation for the new policy. But analysts say Beijing is concerned about the growth of evangelical Christianity in Communist China, which is officially atheist. Estimates run from 50 million to more than 100 million Protestants and about 6 million Catholics in a country where party members number 70 million. The Zhejiang coastal city of Wenzhou, known as "China's Jerusalem" for its religious ferment, has 1.2 million evangelicals in a population of 9 million.

The campaign in Zhejiang is notable for its scope, but also for targeting official Protestant Three-Self churches.

These churches are legal and registered and consider themselves loyal to the Chinese state. (Authorities have waged a less visible campaign against the proliferation of illegal "house" churches in Zhejiang.)

"For the past two years, more Three-Self churches are being targeted, so we can expect more resistance from them," said Teng Biao, a human rights lawyer from Beijing now in residence at Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In May the government ceased tearing down crosses but issued a ban on all crosses atop churches through a new religious structures building code. The code stipulates that crosses be removed, reduced in size, and affixed to the side of the edifice in the same color as the building, rendering them hard to see.

The leadership of Chongyi Church in Hangzhou—one of the largest Christian churches in China with more than 10,000 in weekly attendance—openly protested the new policy. The protest letter ran on the church website but disappeared after a week.

The letter is "important, since the Three-Self churches tend to be supportive of the government," said Teng, who has argued religious freedom cases in China.

The Chongyi letter cites the Constitution, saying the nation is bound to "rules that respect the traditions and customs of all religions." Efforts to remove a fixture that "for 2,000 years" has been a sign of "faith and love" on top of churches doesn't show respect, it stated.

The letter goes on to state that building and architectural codes in cities have always been adapted to specific places and structures, and a blanket ban on all crosses goes past their legal scope.

Further, knocking down crosses amounts to "excessive interference" by authorities, the letter said. The language of the new rules is "vague . . . with little accuracy" and is "likely to cause chaos in execution and religious conflicts," it continues. To create new rules for all religious buildings but in a way that only touches Protestants and Catholics, its authors write, is prejudicial and unjust. —Robert Marquand, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## China knocks down crosses, faithful put them back up

A group of Protestant churches in China's Zhejiang Province are engaging in civil disobedience against local authorities who have knocked down the crosses from atop their churches: they are fighting back and restoring the traditional symbol of Christianity.

In some cases, the often elderly resisters in 16 churches around the cities of Lishui and Fuyang have persistently replaced the cross three times in a single day. So far, the restored crosses—some made of raw lumber—remain.

Such actions are part of an intensifying standoff between the faithful and party authorities following a state campaign to target Protestants in places where their numbers are growing and their churches are visible. A number of churchgoers who have reaffixed the crosses late at night or early in the morning said they are acting

## People



PHOTO COURTESY OF REUTERS/FABIAN BIMMER

■ When **Ingeborg Syllm-Rapoport** first submitted her doctoral thesis on diphtheria in 1938, she was barred from completing her oral defense under Hitler's Nuremberg Race Laws, which disenfranchised citizens with Jewish ancestry.

The retired, 102-year-old neonatologist got another chance when officials at the University Clinic in Hamburg-Eppendorf learned of the discriminatory case and formally invited her to finish her Ph.D.

Syllm-Rapoport, whose vision is now declining, worked with friends to mine online research and prepare for the examination.

"I was very excited during the exam and could have done better, if I had been just a little younger," Syllm-Rapoport told NBC News.

But the Berlin resident was apparently still sharp enough to defend her work successfully. She received her official certificate in Hamburg on June 9, surrounded by friends, family, and former students.

"I am happy and proud, but this is not about me," Syllm-Rapoport said. "This is in commemoration of those who did not make it this far." —Jaleesa Jones, *USA Today*

■ Former British prime minister **Tony Blair** has a new job campaigning against religious and political extremism in Europe.

A week after he stepped down as Middle East envoy of the Quartet—the United States, United Nations, European Union, and Russia—Blair announced he is the new chairman of the European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation.

The organization describes itself as "an opinion-making and advisory body."

It campaigns for all European countries to adopt laws that criminalize Holocaust denial, to create clearer definitions of what constitutes racism and anti-Semitism, and to oblige governments to pay for security at synagogues and Jewish schools.

The council was founded in 2007 by Russian-born Jewish businessman Moshe Kantor, now its president.

Blair, who was prime minister from 1997 to 2007, replaces a former Polish president as chairman of a board that also includes José María Aznar, former Spanish prime minister.

Blair will not be paid personally for his new role, but his faith foundation will receive an annual donation; his office refused to disclose the amount. Kantor's net worth is about \$2.4 billion, according to *Forbes*.

In a joint article published June 4 in the *Times of London*, Blair and Kantor said ECTR wants to reach thousands of students across Europe over the next two years, working for racial and religious tolerance.

They said: "It is our firm belief that it is not religion or faith that causes or foments conflict. It is the abuse of religion, which then becomes a mask behind which those bent on death and destruction all too often hide."

Kantor is also president of the European Jewish Congress. —Trevor Grundy, Religion News Service

■ **Lama Surya Das** is one of the handful of Westerners who have been teaching meditation for decades. And yet, he says we're doing it wrong.

"So many people seem to be moving narcissistically—conditioned by our culture, doubtless—into self-centered happiness seeking," he said. True meditation, he said, generates wisdom and compassion, which may be very disquieting, at least in the short term.

Born Jeffrey Miller, he was given the name "Surya Das" by the Indian guru Neem Karoli Baba more than 40 years ago. But Surya Das shifted gears in the

early 1970s to Tibetan Buddhism, subsequently completing two three-year silent meditation retreats and becoming one of the first Westerners to be authorized as a Tibetan lama.

Now meditation—especially mindfulness, which trains the mind to observe nonjudgmentally and attentively—has gone mainstream. In secular forms, it's widespread in health care, education, the corporate world, even the military. Each year, 1 million Americans take up the practice for the first time.

Surya Das is not entirely happy about that. Because of the way meditation is taught, many people think they can't do it, he said. "'Quiet your mind' or 'calm and clear your mind' are instructions I hear way too much," he said. "Some teachers actually encourage people to try to stop thinking, when in fact meditative awareness means being mindful of thoughts and feelings, not simply trying to reduce, alter, or white them out and achieve some kind of oblivion."

In his new book, *Make Me One with Everything* (the answer to a Buddhist joke: "What did the Zen monk say to the hot dog vendor?"), Surya Das argues for a return to the original purpose of Buddhist meditation: not relaxation, but liberation. The goal, he said, is "to genuinely learn how to gain direct access to Oneness, wholeness, completeness, integration with all the parts of themselves and life."

He proposes what he calls "co-meditation"—not trying to find a quiet "moment of Zen" apart from the messy, noisy world of work, family, and children but inviting all of the noise into meditation. That is part of the ancient Tibetan tradition known as Lojong, which often features elaborate visualizations.

"The anti-intellectual meditators, thought-swatters, and imagination-suppressors have long ruled meditation-oriented circles in the West," he said. "But authentic meditative practices can enhance and even unleash the creativity and imagination." —Jay Michaelson, Religion News Service



PHOTO FROM THINNICK.COM



PHOTO BY PAIGE GILBERT, COURTESY OF LAMA SURYA DAS

# LIVING BY The Word

July 12, 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 6:14-29

I LIKE THE GOSPEL of Mark, with its many abrupt, surprising acts that take place “suddenly” and “immediately.” It sometimes seems a little breathless—as though the story is still being told, years after the fact, with utter astonishment. And I like Mark’s frequent mention of how people felt: the crowds were “amazed.” The disciples were “filled with fear.” Everyone “marveled.” A woman “felt in her body that she was healed,” and she approached Jesus “with fear and trembling.” The book ends (at least in one version) with just such an aside about the feelings of the women at Jesus’ empty tomb: “trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

In this week’s text, Herod’s conflicted feelings about John the Baptist provide a curious footnote to a dark story of jealousy, seduction, and murder. Mark says Herod is “greatly perplexed.” The tetrarch is afraid of the prophet, intrigued by him, puzzled, and threatened—but disinclined to hurt him. It is not an unusual predicament. King Lear might have felt this way about his candid fool; Captain Ahab about his sober first mate, Starbuck; Henry VIII about his friend Thomas More, who set a standard of conscience the king couldn’t meet; George Wallace about Martin Luther King, whose prophetic voice trumped the power of the governor’s office. Prophets and political leaders have generally been at uneasy odds, often bound in intimate enmity that leaves the latter greatly perplexed.

It is easy to see how prophets threaten established power, especially where power is being abused. What is not so obvious is how the prophet’s greatest success may lie in the perplexity of the powerful—how the prophet’s job is not only to speak truth but also to bemuse. The root meaning of *perplexity* is “completely entangled.” When perplexed we find ourselves wound up in the strands of a problem, unable quite to distance ourselves or to retreat into indifference. Herod seems to harbor this kind of fascination for the wild man who wandered his territory eating locusts and honey and preaching some sort of sedition. The most poignant note in the record of Herod’s tragic self-betrayal is the simple observation, “yet he liked to listen to him.”

I generally think of the prophetic word as one of warning—sharp, dire, perhaps laced with outrage on God’s behalf—or as one of promise for the faithful. John preaches both repentance and the coming of the kingdom, both warning and promise. Because this message has become so familiar to us, it is easy to forget the element of puzzlement Mark mentions. John doesn’t just offer a convicting reminder of what the Jewish people are called to. He also presents a mysterious, intriguing, compelling

presence, his very clothing a challenge to decency and good order, his humility bold and unapologetic. John’s willingness to dwell at the margins, to live on little and to risk arrest and death, fascinates the very man whose power he challenges.

When I hear a prophetic word, I recognize it by its evidence, conviction, and scriptural roots—and by the way it summons me to change. It is a word that breaks through denial, challenges norms, and seeks to awaken. It is characterized by courage.

I think about people I have liked to listen to even though their message disturbed my peace of mind—Bill McKibben on climate change, Amy Goodman on corporate corruption, Jeremy Scahill on “dirty wars,” Edward Snowden on NSA spying, Eric Schlosser on the fast food industry, Chris Hedges on U.S. wars. They are truth tellers and whistleblowers who challenge privilege, who direct a critical gaze at abuses of power and culpable ignorance, who spell out consequences most of us are loath to face. They are also good stylists who know enough rhetorical strategies and stories to engage even those who would rather avoid what they have to say. Their messages are bold and candid; they pull no punches. But their methods have been honed patiently and conscientiously, fact-checked and fine-tuned. They have made themselves accountable.

And they are imaginative. Walter Brueggemann insists that “it is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination.” He also lists among the prophet’s tasks “to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture.”

Imagining alternatives to “normal” means baffling those for whom normal is normative. It is hard to question established conventions and institutional practices. It takes a person of wide-angled vision, an unusual turn of mind, and the courage to confront. And confrontation generally doesn’t succeed by itself. It is best partnered with prayer, wit, and good wordsmithing.

I like the idea that the Spirit comes in through the back door: that healthy spirituality is subversive because it hews to a plumb line in a culture of crooked walls. The one who stands straight among those walls will seem disturbingly out of line. As Flannery O’Connor put it, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you odd.” The courage to be odd and interesting seems to belong to the prophetic calling—both to those called for a lifetime and those called at particular moments to speak an unpopular truth when no one else is likely to.

Jesus left in his wake a trail of uneasy, intrigued, perplexed hearers scratching their beards or pacing their courtyards. There must have been those among them who knew that if they listened long enough, they would be brought to a point of decision they’d much rather avoid. Hearing would have consequences. But though they were greatly perplexed, they lingered. For reasons they couldn’t fathom, they liked to listen to him.

# Reflections on the lectionary

**July 19, 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Mark 6:30–34, 53–56**

**AT A FACULTY council meeting a few years back, a colleague raised what I thought was the best question of the year: “When are we going to stop rewarding each other for doing too much?”**

I admired her for asking it. It was rooted in sound theology. I was working at a Christian college where we had reason to ask ourselves why our stress levels, overcommitment, and fatigue reflected so little collective attention to sabbath rest. Our sabbaticals were expected to be productive, our weekends cheerfully interrupted by college activities that counted as community service.

We were, I think, no worse in this respect than other Christian colleges, and certainly no worse than most American workplaces; as a nation we work more hours than most, though we are not necessarily the most productive. But my colleagues and I did participate in a pathology that Jesus sought to heal among his disciples, as we see in this week’s Gospel passage and others in which he calls them to rest or models the practice himself.

When the disciples tell Jesus “all that they had done and taught,” it may be with some expectation of praise for a job well done. They are energetic, committed, and sacrificial. They are growing in their faith and inspiring others. The crowds of followers have mushroomed.

But Jesus doesn’t praise them for their diligence—at least not in such a way as to make the editorial cut when the encounter was recorded. He tells them to come away to a deserted place where they can be all by themselves. No admiring crowd. No record keepers. No trainees. None of the needy, who will have to rely on others for a time. For, Mark writes, “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure, even to eat.” It is hard for me to read this last observation without a little uneasy laughter, thinking of many lunches spent at my computer with a sandwich.

Time to eat may be one of the better measures of the health of a workplace and a community. Where there is no time to eat, fellowship diminishes. Conversation suffers. Morale sinks. When I began working at the aforementioned college, our department was in the habit—already quaint by some standards—of gathering once a week for tea in the common room. No agenda. Just tea and conversation, now and then a shared reading, occasionally a birthday celebration. It was lovely. We didn’t invite colleagues, and no one signed up to do extra tasks. It was a small department, and we knew one another well, in part because we had tea together on Thursday afternoons.

Alas, this custom gave way under the pressure of increased committees, commitments, and administrative demands for

documentation. We assessed more and enjoyed each other less. We kept no Thursday “sabbath”; we ate more solitary lunches behind closed doors. Friendships have survived, but not the same level of day-to-day mutual awareness.

The Gospel story continues by reporting, perhaps with a bit of grim humor, that the crowd finds out where the retreating disciples are going and hastens there ahead of them, gathering steam and stray villagers as they go. So much for the weekend retreat. Jesus, seeing them, “had compassion on them.” They “rushed about the whole region,” bringing their sick. It doesn’t say whether the disciples get their rest. But the story does alert us to the fact that just because we decide to take a sabbath rest or a minivacation or a spa day, we have no guarantee that others will respect our needs and withhold their demands. Our rest, if we are to have it, will have to be claimed in the midst of the noise and haste, in spite of others’ agendas, and with a clear intention to honor the countercultural priorities our faith encourages.

Rest—real rest, not guilt-ridden “stolen time”—comes only as a function of trust. I have to trust that others will take care of what I cannot. I have to trust that others will understand my decision to withdraw or, if they don’t, that God will honor a prayerful decision to take my rest when it makes me a better servant. I have to trust that our times are in God’s hands—not only our ultimate destinies but our evenings and weekends and mealtimes and family times.

Rest covers a range of possibilities. The disciples at rest may have fished for their suppers. They may have lain at the lake-side and watched the clouds. They may have made a little music. Some may have left their band of brothers and enjoyed a bit of alone time. Some may have slept in. They very likely ate together. Perhaps they watched the stars and told one another about their dreams.

These things matter. It has occurred to me often that the small things are the big things in disguise. You can’t measure the significance of a shared meal or a walk without a phone or a half hour of quiet with one’s feet up or a game of backgammon before bedtime. You can only observe it in the way pleasure slows and opens the racing heart and surprises the weary spirit.

I do not believe it is God’s will for us to be weary. Rest is always a teacher: God is in charge, and we are not indispensable. Play is a blessing. In laughter we become like little children; in sleep we are watched over; in lingering over a meal we learn something about love we can’t learn anywhere else. And we are better colleagues when we take time to commune over a cup of tea.

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*The author is Marilyn McEntyre, professor of medical humanities at the Joint Medical Program of the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, San Francisco.*



The Wittenberg doors where, according to tradition, Luther posted his 95 Theses in 1517.  
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## THE REFORMATION AFTER 500 YEARS

# Repent and celebrate

by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson  
and Thomas Albert Howard

THE PROSPECT OF one's imminent death, Samuel Johnson famously said, "wonderfully concentrates the mind." The same might be said of observing major commemorative dates.

The world rushes headlong toward one such date: October 31, 2017, the quincentenary of the Protestant Reformation, the anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 Theses. Numerous institutions worldwide have begun planning for the epochal moment.

But exactly how does one commemorate a historical juggernaut of such immense influence and contested interpretation? Protestantism, it should be remembered, has been credited (or blamed) for the rise of the modern nation state, liberalism, capitalism, religious wars, tolerance, democracy, individualism, subjectivism, pluralism, freedom of conscience, modern science, secularism, and so much else. Interpretations of “1517” make up a veritable palimpsest of modern Western history. Scholars and journalists will revisit many past interpretations

## The commemoration should be marked by repentance as well as celebration.

as 2017 draws near and thereby add another layer to our collective memory of this historical watershed.

But what duty do Christians have in marking this moment—especially those who care about that most necessary and elusive of theological goals, Christian unity? Commemoration can present a welcome opportunity for taking stock of the “big picture,” for stepping back and assessing progress and failure with respect to this goal and many others.

But commemoration can also be a dodge. It is one thing to acknowledge that something very big and important happened 500 years ago. It is another thing to evaluate it conscientiously and then, as a result, either repent or celebrate as appropriate. It will be a mark of the maturity of ecumenically minded Protestants if, in 2017, they prove able to repent and celebrate in appropriate degrees—not just choosing one at the expense of the other—and likewise if Catholics prove able to celebrate anything at all.

To be sure, different denominations will have different reasons and resources for commemoration. And diversity in marking the event promises to be a healthy thing.

At the same time, we believe that all parties, Protestant as well as Catholic, should keep several key points in mind as they prepare for the milestone.

First, all should recognize the hostility and spirit of recrimination that shaped much confessional theology in the post-Reformation era. We would like to see clergy and theologians on all sides take up the reconstructive task of disentangling the hostility from their churches’ respective theologies and reimagining, counterfactually and ironically, what these might be like without the hostility written into them.

This approach has been explored to a modest extent. It’s a dangerous one, because there’s a tendency to see in it an abstract, ecumenical “supertheology” or a lowest-common-denominator theology that is no longer recognizable to either party.

That probably explains the virulent reaction in some quarters toward the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, despite the fact that it carefully outlined the respective emphases of Lutherans and Catholics that were to be maintained, not eliminated, by the newfound agreement on the subject.

What we are looking for is an elimination of the necessity of enemies, not an elimination of the necessity of arguments. We look forward to a multiplicity of purged confessional theologies, maintaining the particular gifts and insights on all sides while remaining open to the truly Christian insight of the other, even of the old enemy. In the words of the Catholic ecumenist Paul Murray, we propose a “receptive ecumenism” and encourage all parties to ask: What can we offer and what can we receive from others to foster a deepened communion in Christ and the Spirit?

**A**t the same time, we would like to see deep and careful historical work examining just how the politics and personalities of the Reformation led to such explosive and enduring results. Why, after all, did *this* reformer, Luther, who stood in such a long line of church reformers, receive such a dire response? How did his counterresponse set the conditions for later developments? To what extent did state violence, dynastic politics, institutional inertia, and bloodshed close down possibilities for reconciliation?

Such attention to the contingent historical and political circumstances of the Reformation has been one of the key factors that have allowed for significant ecumenical progress in recent years, creating space for conversation where none existed beforehand. In an important ecumenical project some years ago in Germany, for example, Karl Lehmann, bishop of Mainz, and the Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg put it this way:

It has been generally accepted that doctrinal differences were the essential reason for the disintegration of the Western Church into different denominations. At the same time, it must be pointed out that other elements contributed to the division of the churches in the sixteenth century, not differences of doctrine alone. Political, cultural, social, and economic factors were involved, as well as the laws that go to maintain any already existing institution. Nor must we forget the part played by individual human characteristics.

When theology has led to violence or when violence has informed theology, Christians have a duty to look this grave evil in the eye and repent. As John Paul II put it in his encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut unum sint* (1995): “The commitment to ecumenism must be based upon . . . a sincere desire for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, [and all] are called to re-examine together their painful past and the hurt which that past regrettably continues to provoke.”

For an example of what we are talking about, one could do no better than to follow the path laid down by the Lutheran-

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Mennonite dialogue, whose first-ever, jointly written history of Lutheran-Anabaptist relations in the 16th century paved the way for a public declaration of repentance and request for forgiveness on the part of the Lutheran World Federation in 2010, which was met with a full declaration of forgiveness on the part of the Mennonite World Conference. The same sort of project undertaken by Protestants (of various stripes) and Roman Catholics would, we are convinced, help break down many barriers and open up new possibilities for unity that will remain invisible to us as long as we refuse to confess our sins openly and in detail.

Neither task can be undertaken on human steam alone. Freeing ourselves from the burden of our guilt-laden pasts, whether individually or collectively, can be accomplished only by the power of the One who takes away the sins of the world. Nearly half a millennium has passed since 1517, and in the intervening years we have seen how the presence of Christ is working itself into the far corners of the world, bringing his grace and peace. At the same time, his "adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion" (1 Pet. 5:8). So it will be until the final enemy is defeated and Christ is all in all.

Finally, there is the question of Martin Luther. Past commemorations have tended to focus on him at the expense of other 16th-century voices. But the Reformation cannot be reduced to Luther alone. Insofar as he has prodded the church

to needed reform, let him be heard. But the theological task in 2017 is not so much to retrieve Luther, but to follow him only insofar as he pointed the way to Christ in faith and to turning to our neighbors, near and far, in love.

If the church needs to be reformed along the way for the sake of this faith and love, so be it. Insofar as Luther can be of service in these tasks, we hope Protestants will continue to turn to him for insight and guidance. But no Protestant denomination retains the copyright on the reformer, and Protestants have certainly not always been the best ambassadors for his witness. Luther at 500 is not primarily for Protestants, not even for Lutherans, but for all who hunger for the real presence of Christ.

The best anniversary that we can imagine for the Reformation at 500 is a prodigal distribution of Christ to the hungry as well as to those who have not yet realized that they are starving. In such a celebration, we suggest that Luther ought to be only one—a conspicuous one no doubt, but finally only one—of the many flawed, admirable saints of the church present at the table.

If this is the case, and if historical divisions are approached in a spirit of truthfulness and contrition, the Reformation's quincentenary might in fact wonderfully concentrate the mind not only on the past and its hostilities but, more important, on the future and its possibilities.

CC

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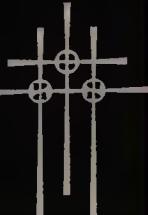
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Why ‘secularism’ has no meaning

# Sacred inwardness

by Marilynne Robinson

*The world is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.*

—Psalm 24:1

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will.*

—Matthew 10:29

I WILL PAUSE over the word *secularism* because I don't know how it should be understood in a Christian context. In contemporary use it means the ground gained in society and culture by agnosticism or atheism as religion recedes.

Historically it has meant the dispossession of one religious system by another, notably Catholicism by Henry VIII's Church of England. It is true that Henry won the support of peers by giving confiscated holdings to private individuals, a part of the process of shoring up royal dominance over the church which he and many others justified on religious grounds. It is also true that during the Reformation, again on religious grounds, Catholic art was destroyed or painted over by Protestants who felt iconography encouraged forms of worship that amounted to idolatry. However regrettable the destruction, this was no more secularizing in our sense than was the Catholic destruction of Wyclifite Bibles. This is to say, in neither case was disbelief a factor.

*Secular* is a term used within Catholicism to distinguish the world from the church. “The world” has had strongly negative connotations at various points in Christian history, particularly during the Middle Ages, but the influence of the biblical insistence that God made the world and that he loves it seems to me to be very strong among the religious traditions now. Many modern denominations have defined themselves for centuries against the belief that the sacred is especially localized in shrines and sanctuaries, or that the presence of God or of faith in God can be inferred from the number of crosses and pious billboards to be seen along the highways.

Typology was or is one way of understanding and experiencing an articulate presence of God, the Creator pervasively present in the natural world in what he gives us to understand through it. This again raises questions about the notion of the secular, the worldly, as existing in opposition to the sacred. If the world is the Lord's, if it speaks of him, if it is sustained by him in every moment, then, granting the historical importance of the idea of secularism, I cannot in good faith proceed as if it has meaning for me, or as if I find it at all appropriate as a term of judgment brought to bear against our period or any other.

We presume to know more than we can know. In periods and places where religious doubt is criminalized, unquestioning faith is likely to appear universal. Where religious faith is treated as naive and intellectually indefensible, few will confess to it. Where it truly is naive and intellectually indefensible, those who can't identify with it are often treated as having actually rejected faith, and may believe this of themselves.

So let us call this inability to know the state of our fellow's soul a veil dropped down between his or her sacred inwardness and the coercive intrusions to which the religious and the anti-religious are equally tempted. If the fate of souls is at the center

## Faith lives in the human world by the grace of God.

of the cosmic drama, is it difficult to imagine that it will unfold, so to speak, in a place set apart, a holy of holies—that is, a human consciousness? Where better might an encounter with God take place? If God is attentive to us individually, as Jesus' saying about the fall of a sparrow certainly implies, then would his history with us be the same in every case, articulable and verifiable, manifest in behaviors that square with expectations? Would it be something we should be ready to talk about to pollsters or journalists?

Perhaps the real lack of faith in modern society comes down to a lack of reverence for humankind, for those around us, about whom we might consider it providential that we can know nothing—in these great matters that sometimes involve feigning or concealment, that are beyond ordinary thought and conventional experience, and that can in any case be minutely incremental, since God really does have all the time in the world. Perhaps it is a gross presumption to try to imagine a God's eye view of things, but I can only think these encounters, every one unique, must be extraordinarily beautiful. If it is hard for us to believe that the God who searches us and knows us also loves us, perhaps we should learn to be better humanists.

Luke concludes his genealogy with Adam, whom he calls

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Marilynne Robinson recently wrote the novel *Lila*. This essay was her presentation at a session this past spring at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta on theological imagination and secularization.

"son of God." Paul calls Christ the second Adam. Our universal ancestor is also humankind, both in our mortal singularity and as a species. Typology in the classic sense might trace out the inverse symmetries of Fall and Redemption.

I would rather think in terms that are not quite so literary, that perhaps extend the meaning of the words *type* and *antitype*. In 1 Corinthians Paul says, "the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."

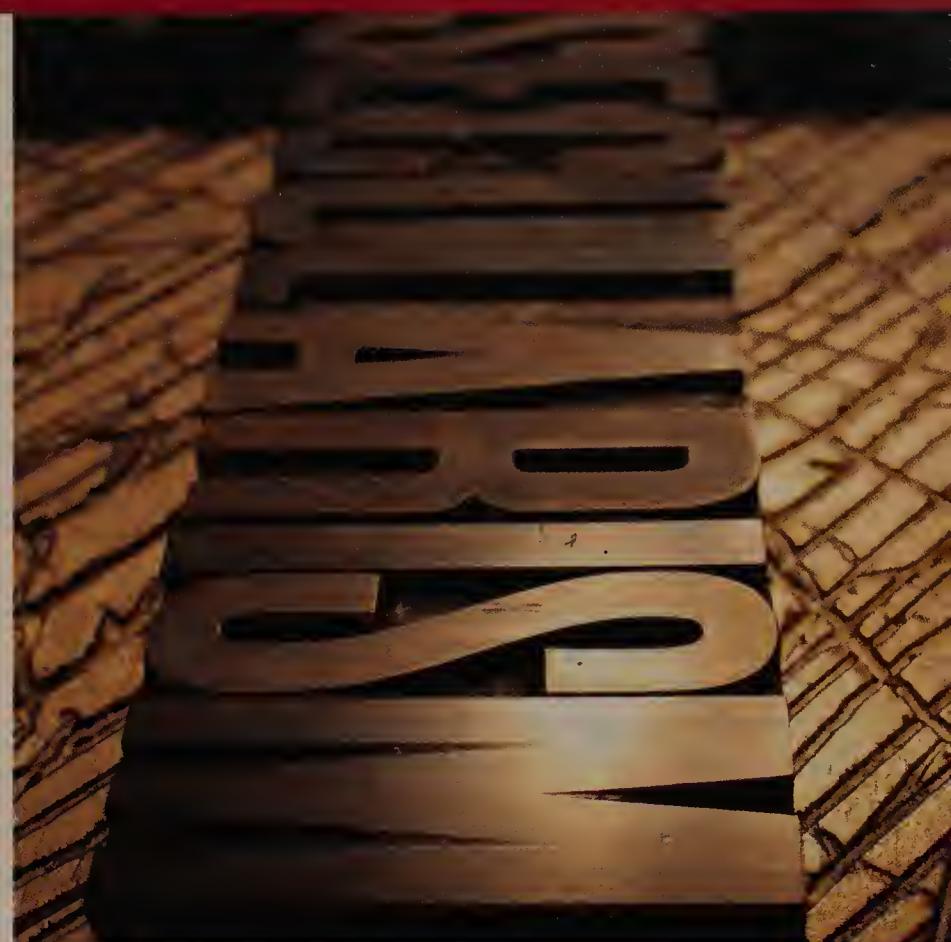
This is an instance of the kind of a *fortiori* argument that is so often the method of biblical writers. If something is true of a human being, how much more profoundly must it be true of the Lord. This is a strategy of comparison, asserting that a quality exists in the divine being for which our reality offers analogy, and no analogy. If we know how to give our children good gifts, how much more . . . If, in this instance, the human person is the type and God the antitype, as is also clearly implied in the very primary tenet that we are made in the image of God, and if our thoughts, our spirit, our inwardness, the secret that we are, shares a likeness in kind to the being of God, then they are all certainly owed reverence.

All I wish to suggest is that faith lives in the human world by the grace of God, because of the love and loyalty of God, and in the presence of God, which is free, indifferent to our anxieties, to our categories, and, quite emphatically, I think, to our very negative judgments about the spiritual state of our neighbors. If the churches are uneasy about their status in contemporary society, these are problems for the churches to deal with. Their waning, if it is real, cannot be interpreted as an invidious change in the Divine Nature.

If we suppress that slightly inquisitorial impulse to fret over the state and the nature of belief among those around us, we will no doubt find ourselves inclining toward at least a tentative universalism, toward extending the courtesy of nonjudgment very broadly indeed in deference to human mystery and divine grace. If our presumption is that God's fatherly likeness to us is reflected in our characteristics as a species, our capacity for thought, for love, for generosity and creativity—reflected especially in our inwardness and self-awareness, that haunting *I am* that must be part of what Paul means by the word *spirit*—then exclusivist ideas about God's dealings with humankind are very hard to sustain.

This may sound like a concession or an accommodation to contemporary critics of religion, but it is in fact a very old belief in Christianity, though put out of sight by traditions that were concerned first of all with establishing and defending a prescriptive orthodoxy.

William Langland, presumably a Lollard or Wycliffite, wrote in the late 14th century. In his *Piers Plowman* he rejects the teaching "that neither Saracens nor Jews nor any other creature in the likeness of Christ can be saved without Baptism." He says, "The divine fire comes not to consume, but to bring light. So an honest man that lives by the law that he knows, believing there is none better (for if he knew of a better he would accept it)—a man who has never treated any one unjustly, and who dies in this spirit—surely the God of truth would not reject such honesty as this."



Elsewhere he says, "faith alone is sufficient to save the ignorant. And that being so, many Jews and Saracens may be saved, perhaps before we are." And again, "the Jews possess a true Law, which God Himself engraved on stone so that it should be steadfast and last for ever. 'Love God and your neighbour' is the perfect Law of the Jews, and God gave it to Moses to teach to men until the Messiah came. So to this day the Jews follow that Law and believe it to be the best." I need hardly point out that Jesus agreed.

The popular religious movement Langland speaks from and to was persecuted with great violence for generations in an effort to suppress it as heresy. That suppression failed. But our forgetfulness of the breadth of Christian tradition has almost suppressed what violence could not. It is hardly possible to look at history or at the present state of the world without bitterly regretting the loss of such voices.

All this came to my mind when I watched President Obama's speech at the National Prayer Breakfast and then the reaction to it. He and I are members of the same denomination, the United Church of Christ, which may give me some advantage in interpreting his words. The president made a clear statement of his own Christianity, and at the same time he resisted any suggestion that he made negative judgments of others on the basis of their religion, or that he would define Islam itself as an adversary. If I am any judge of such things, this posture is profoundly Christian. If I am to take the objections to his speech as made in good faith, then I think we Christians have to have a good long conversation about what Christianity is and what it means for the world.

Langland speaks of the image of Christ where we might say the image of God. Here is Christ as the antitype of Adam, our universal ancestor. Our likeness to him and to one another, his great, mysterious blessing on us all, should compel our reverence. CC

# The mystery of marriage

by Frederick A. Niedner

**ALL THE WORLD'S SORROWS** descend upon the souls of the Lamed Vovnicks, the 36 righteous ones, says an old Jewish legend. Before they get that far, a goodly share of all those griefs, regrets, and torments begin as love stories whose players have somehow lost their way, and confessors of every kind receive them as broken shards of narrative poured out in search of meaning, mercy, or absolution. Healing comes through the graces of time and unburdening, but even as a child growing up in a pastor's home I sensed that many of those tangled stories never went away. They lived in the memory and in the prayers and behind the preoccupied gaze of one who knew and kept the community's secrets.

Rarely did my siblings or I ever learn the specifics of any but the most public stories that silently haunted my childhood home. Once, however, long after my parents had retired, I happened to be with them when they received a letter from someone in a congregation they had served many years earlier. Mom read the note and handed it to Dad without comment. After a few moments he looked up, met Mom's eyes, and said quietly, "Thank God that's over." Both seemed near tears.

Later that day I heard a story that has haunted me ever since, partly because my parents censored out the names, so it could have explained the lives of any number of people I thought I knew but really did not. A young man had gone off to fight in World War II and then returned to the girlfriend who had written him frequently all through that dark time. They took up where they had left off, but the reunion didn't last. The man who survived the war wasn't the same one who had left his youth behind to become a warrior. He ended the relationship and a short time later took up with another young woman in town. Very soon those two planned to marry.

"I am pregnant," said the woman who had waited so faithfully for the soldier who jilted her. The man "did the right thing," as folks said then. He broke his engagement and married the old girlfriend. After a short time, it became obvious she carried no child. She admitted her desperate lie.

From that day on, the two of them never again slept in the same room, although they remained married for more than 50 years. *Divorce* was only a whispered word back then, something too shameful to discuss, much less perpetrate. So they lived in the same house like estranged sib-

lings, while everyone else in town saw them as generous pillars of the community, unusual only because they remained childless.

The husband made occasional, tearful visits to the pastor's office, in which he confided, among other things, the weekly heartbreak of watching the woman he'd wanted to marry and still loved walk up the aisle in church with her husband and children, every time thinking, "That should be me by her side."

Neither my heart nor my mind can fathom the depth and expanse of loneliness and heartache in this story that ended, at least in some ways, with the note that announced that strangely faithful husband's death. Nor can I ponder that eerie

## In the Bible, the problem of loneliness catches even the Creator by surprise.

narrative without comparing it to the story of another childless couple whose nearly 70-year marriage ended on my watch during the brief time I spent in ministry before becoming an academic.

They were 16 and 18 when they'd married in 1902, and they'd spent their lives eking out a living, sometimes just barely, on a small farm outside the city. They no longer came to church because neither could see well enough to keep a driver's license. They had little savings and no pension, so they still raised a few pigs, working that tiny farm as best they could with their wizened old bodies, and every month, without fail, they mailed a small contribution to the church.

One morning in the year I arrived, the wife didn't wake up at her usual time. The husband tried to rouse her, but her body was cold. This pair had outlived all their kinfolk and the few friends they'd made over the years, so only a handful attended the funeral a few days later. When the moment came for the funeral director to close the open casket, the wiry little husband, dressed in an old suit he may well have worn at his wed-

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ding, jumped from his seat a few feet away and, before any of us could stop him, climbed into the casket and lay there clinging to his beloved. "Just bury me with her, please!" he begged, over and over, between his sobs. In all the years since, I may have done something more difficult than helping to pull a weeping old man from his last embrace that day, but I don't know what it might have been.

Several months later that lonely old man didn't wake up. As we buried him, without drama and with even fewer people in attendance, I likely wasn't the only one present who uttered a wordless, silent prayer that might have been translated, "Thank God that's over." That prayer, like the one I would hear many years later while visiting my parents, lifted before God the mystery of marriage. Each acknowledged an end to grieving, but one celebrated the gift of incalculable riches amid abject poverty, while the other entrusted God with the sadness of two lives wasted on relentless impoverishment masquerading as propriety and abundance. In truth, however, none but those two couples themselves knew the secrets, both sweet and hurtful, that marked their joined lives.

We talk incessantly and intensely about marriage these days. Issues of justice and equality compel us to do so. Yet beyond the legalities that remind us in every generation that marriage is always and primarily a contract about property and only secondarily and intermittently about love and the banishment of loneliness, marriage remains a mystery that the countless number of marriages consummated in the long history of our species cannot ultimately define, either singly or all of them together.

The Bible takes note of the mystery when it tells how the problem of loneliness catches even the Creator by surprise. "Loneliness simply won't do," the Lord God declares and then sets out to find somewhere an *ezer kenegdo*, a "corresponding strength," as partner for the hitherto ungendered mud creature. Fashioned from the same mud, a host of animals appear and get interviews for the job. All fail to qualify. Plan B—and you know there's mystery involved when the Almighty needs one of those— involves surgery. A side-ectomy results, finally, in gender, but just as important, living with someone different, but of the same bone and flesh, has the potential to banish loneliness, as two become "one flesh."

Here we stand before another layer of mystery. One flesh? Some have seen here an image of bodies tangled together in the act of physical intercourse, others the creation of offspring, a new life grown

from the contributions of two earlier models. I have come to see it as a phrase that captures some of the truth: after a few years' worth of making their way together, partnered individuals scarcely know where their own self ends and the other begins. Neither remains the person he or she was before sharing every day and night, joy and sorrow, poverty and wealth. Even those

## No one from the outside can fully grasp the inner workings of a marriage.

who come to loathe each other have become one flesh. Many of us have known people who couldn't wait for a divorce to become final, only to find it impossible, at least for a while, to choose a new home. No matter what the realtor shows, the only criteria the new singleton can summon up are features the ex-spouse valued.

We sometimes imagine we understand what makes the marriages around us tick. Many of us grew up with married parents whom we could watch closely and whose secrets we could occasionally discern. Some people study married people close-

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ly and for long enough to risk hanging out a marriage counselor's shingle. Fiction addicts like me devour hundreds of novels, so many of which tell the stories and probe the inner workings of at least one marriage, and we can only imagine such tales come from experience and yet another kind of laboratory research into this most mysterious of human behaviors. Eventually, after having alternately suffered or found ourselves exhilarated for a spell inside everything from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to Updike's *Couples* to Sue Miller's *While I Was Gone*, we presume ourselves wise about these things. We know why some marriages devolve into hell on earth while others yield more than merely a taste of paradise.

And yet, as Ferdinand Mount, a longtime student of marriage habits, puts it, "It is the essence of marriage that it is private and apart from the rest of society. Its 'selfishness' or 'exclusiveness' is not its undertone but its heart and soul." History has witnessed many kinds of marriages—polygamous and monogamous, same-sex and heterosexual, arranged, Internet-brokered, purely accidental, or even the result of capture or kidnapping—and each one is different. No one from the outside can fully grasp the inner workings of any marriage. Even those inside, who lie together naked and try as best they can to bare their secrets and reveal

themselves, sometimes find themselves lonely and strangers, mysteries even to themselves, and that can happen even on the best days.

**S**o far as we know, and regardless of what happens afterward, each of us gets but one chance to pass through space and time as flesh and blood creatures on this planet. To entrust one's only body, mind, and well-being to another person, and to do so with the promise that this partnership will endure 'til death do us part, makes the consequences as eternal as those discovered too late by the rich man of parable fame, the one who let poor Lazarus dumpster dive outside his home but who never went out to make his acquaintance. There are no do-overs, even for those who take two or three tries before getting things at least partly right.

I can no longer find the quote, although for a time I repeated it frequently in wedding homilies and attributed it to James Thurber: "If getting married is such a great idea, why didn't God try it?" Whoever asked such a question never read the prophet Hosea's oracles, in which God speaks as an anguished cuckold betrayed by adulterous Israel, but who chooses to remain faithful in spite of the shame. Christians take comfort in all sorts of circumstances by pointing to Christ's analogous experiences, and through them the assurance of God's knowing such things. Perhaps this is why so many have sought or fabricated evidence of Jesus having taken a wife.

Such searches overlook the obvious. John the Baptist calls himself the best man to the bridegroom Jesus, and immediately thereafter Jesus finds himself with a noontime thirst at Jacob's well in Samaria. Right on cue, a woman appears, and Jesus asks for a drink. We know this scene, for we have witnessed there the betrothals of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah, even Ruth and Boaz. This time, however, the prospective bride has survived five previous marriages and an unspecified sixth relationship. Jesus joins her family for the requisite hospitality, but he leaves the well without a drink and the village without a wife. We must wait until another noontime, when again Jesus will ask for a drink. This time he will receive one, and with it he takes his bride at last, the whole lot of us in every time and place.

Jesus took each of those five lost marriage stories with him to the cross, plus the sixth that went unnamed, along with every other like it, told or untold. All of them now belong to God, who alone knows the countless host of all our broken, beautiful stories of becoming one flesh, for better or for worse. For us, each of them ends, of course, which is precisely what makes the blessed among them so precious. While we might say, either in sad relief or gratitude for an end to grieving, "Thank God that's over," by this act of handing over, we acknowledge that God remembers, even cherishes, all our attempts to work with God at banishing the one thing even God cannot abide—being alone, unknown, and forgotten.

## Salzburg, Republic of Austria, July 2006

*In order not to repeat history, it is not enough to know it,  
we must know ourselves, and our complicity.*

—Schilling

Some days you have to take what you can get, and that day my mother was too sick to find yet one more crowded pavement café

and the worst of it was, sitting there in my habit, I had to see it all unfold: the tired couple with their small child, the empty table

and the promise of refreshment, and then the waiter descending in a blaze of jeers, scathing looks and torrid gestures, and watch

the husband and wife gather their dignity and leave, unwelcome only for the offense of resembling too much the enemy du jour

and I had nowhere to go to, nowhere to hide my shame, no means of protest when the waiter returned and served us sweetly,

set the coffee before me, and the only way I could ask is a veil any better than a chador? was to say, simply, *Dankeschön*

Melaney Poli

## Stories of my childhood

I'M SHORT ON retrievable memories from my childhood, but there have been a few memories I thought I might recover if only I could track down certain books. I began by searching out Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. That was easy. It's still in print and still brings back the feeling I had, when drawing pictures from imagination, of whole worlds appearing ex nihilo from a few penciled lines. I suspect that may have planted a seed of interest in the idea of creation.

An even more exciting find was Crockett Johnson's masterpiece, the *Barnaby* series he contributed during the 1940s to the left-leaning newspaper *PM*. While Dr. Seuss was drawing anti-isolationist cartoons for the same newspaper, Johnson chose to render—in his characteristic clean black lines—the inner life of a young child, Barnaby Baxter, whose stable American suburban home is ruffled by air raid drills, scrap metal drives, rationing, and other intimations of a world under siege. Barnaby is a practical boy, but he needs adventure as much as reassurance; and both needs are met by a slightly disreputable fairy godfather, Mr. O'Malley, whose magic wand is a Havana cigar, whose favorite expression is "Cushlamochree!" and whose compatriots include an invisible leprechaun and a timid ghost. Barnaby's parents, as well as the orthodox Freudian psychologist they consult, are convinced that O'Malley is a compensatory fantasy. But Barnaby—and we—know better; and I was the better for seeing how matter-of-fact one can be when faced with challenges to faith.

Then there was the Little Golden Book whose title I had misremembered as *Crispin's Crispian: The Dog Who Loved Strawberries*. In fact, it was the last book produced by Margaret Wise Brown (of *Goodnight Moon* fame), under the title *Mister Dog*. One has to look within to discover that its subject is Crispin's Crispian—a dog so named because he belongs to himself—who has a liking for strawberries and for a well-ordered life. I'm pretty sure I loved that book because I was an only child, belonging (so I thought) to myself. And when a little boy, who also belongs to himself, ends up moving in with Crispin's Crispian because they understand each other so well, the implication is clear: one can have solitude without isolation, and tranquillity in fellowship.

All this work of recovery has been a mere prelude, however, to the most poignant discovery of all. I had only a picture-memory to go on—difficult to translate into search engine language—of a man discovering by trial and error how to build a

secure arch. After years of searching, I found the book last month: *The Magic Stones*, published in 1957 by "Alain"—a pseudonym for the *New Yorker* cartoonist and painter Daniel Brustlein. I wish I knew how to convey the subtle power of the lines and shapes, and the enchantment they worked upon me. Yet what I find curious is that I had completely forgotten what a religious book it is. It begins and ends in church, telling the story of the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris and of the conquest of "Monsieur Down"—the spirit of gravity who delights in reducing churches to rubble—which made this cathedral and its forerunners possible.

What captivated me, though, was not the towering spires, flying buttresses, and chimera of the cathedral, but the moment (we are told the year is AD 600) when a young man first places stone upon stone, and wood block upon wood block, and realizes that he has stumbled upon the secret of the arch. What thrilled me then was the mere look of the barrel-shaped vault he went on to build, its simplicity, strength, and beauty.

Later on in the book the principles of high Gothic unfold, the cathedral is built (later to be rebuilt under the leadership of Viollet-le-Duc), and Monsieur Down ends his career as the most famous of the chimera on the cathedral's western facade, the grotesque figure popularly called the "spitting gargoyle," who glares resentfully from his aerie, to the delight of tourists.

I don't think I noticed, when I read *The Magic Stones* as a child, that the "high, barrel-shaped vault" was "filled with heavenly sound" uniting worshipers in prayer. I don't think I reflected that its earthly dome was oriented toward the dome of heaven, which leaves its signature in the human fingerprint and heart. All I remember from this book is the image of a young man, some stones and blocks, and an experiment revealing the shape that is of all shapes most perfect.

Yet children are formed by the accumulation of small impressions. I can't help thinking that *The Magic Stones*, Crispin's Crispian, Harold's crayon, and Barnaby's pragmatic faith may have played a part in bringing me after many years of trial and error into the high-barreled vault filled with heavenly sound, under the arch against which the resentment of Monsieur Down shall not prevail.

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Carol Zaleski is professor of world religions at Smith College, and the author, with Philip Zaleski, of *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*.

## A room to herself

by LaVonne Neff

**T**he year: 1255. The place: the English Midlands. The protagonist: Sarah, the daughter of a silk merchant, 17 years old and lovely.

The local squire's son, Sir Thomas, adores Sarah, but she spurns his advances. Sarah is in love with God and God alone; she longs to die to earthly desires by forever shutting herself away from human males. But Thomas refuses to leave Sarah alone, and even Father Ranulf—a priest, a manuscript copyist, and Sarah's spiritual adviser—finds the young woman strangely troubling.

Could there be a better setup for a medieval soap opera? It's obvious what's going to happen, right?

Wrong. Robyn Cadwallader knows far too much about the 13th century to write an anachronistic romance. In her doctoral thesis, "Three Methods for Reading the Thirteenth-Century Seinte Marherete: Archetypal, Semiotic, and Deconstructionist," she discusses medieval attitudes toward female virginity and agency. *The Anchoress*, her first novel, is faithful to the 13th century not only in cultural and historical minutiae, but also in the characters' attitudes. Sarah, Thomas, and Father Ranulf behave like the medieval people they are—and that's why the story may not be predictable to today's readers.

Sounds a bit pedantic. Boring, even.

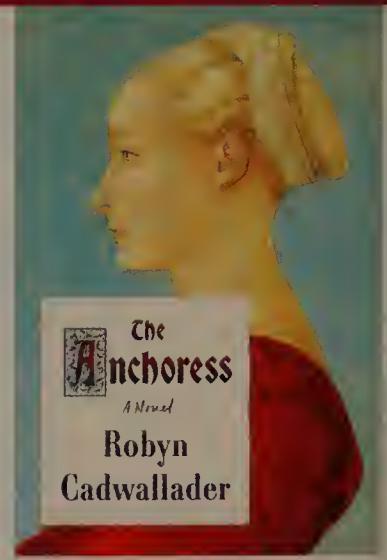
Wrong again. There is no whiff of academia in Cadwallader's style, which overlays straightforward narrative simplicity with a poet's eye for detail. Here's the setup: Sarah is still a teenager, but she knows about death. Her mother died years earlier while giving birth to Sarah's brother. Her younger sister also died in

childbirth, along with her unborn baby. Death is what happens to women who give in to the temptation of lust, Sarah believes.

But being a wife and mother is not her only option. Despite her father's insistence that she marry well in order to rescue his foundering business, she has decided to become an anchoress: a woman who submits to a living death by being locked into a small, dim room attached to a church. Inside that room she will fast and pray and offer counsel to women who seek wisdom. She intends to stay in that room for the rest of her life.

Though Sarah's room measures only seven by nine paces—at most, 18 by 22 feet—and its outside door has been nailed shut, she has three windows. One opens into a reception room where visitors can come to speak to her, one opens into her maids' quarters, and a tiny one allows her to look into the adjoining church. When the maids leave their outside door ajar, she can overhear villagers talking to one another. Women come to see her, ostensibly for spiritual advice but sometimes just to chat. She learns of drunkenness, rape, unwanted pregnancy, and abuse. She knows that the priest who rails against sins of the flesh has a girlfriend and that the squire is cruel to the poverty-stricken villagers. And Sarah, unlike most of the villagers, can read. She spends long hours contemplating not only her rule, but also a book about the doughty fourth-century saint Margaret of Antioch. The world Sarah so longed to flee has invaded her enclosure.

So is this historical fiction, with Sarah



**The Anchoress**  
By Robyn Cadwallader  
Sarah Crichton Books, 320 pp., \$26.00

narrating a story that takes place outside her cloistered walls?

Not quite. To be sure, the book includes many stories that go beyond Sarah's immediate experience. Father Ranulf, the most clearly drawn supporting character, even gets chapters of his own. And historical fiction buffs will appreciate the way the stories intersect with actual events and circumstances of the 13th century. Early in that century, for example, a rule—the *Ancrene Wisse*—was written especially for anchoresses. In 1235, the Statute of Merton allowed the lord of the manor to fence off large tracts of property, thus potentially denying farmers space to grow crops or graze sheep. Marriages arranged for financial reasons were common. Maternal and infant mortality rates were high. Few people could read. Many women chose vowed virginity over marriage.

On the other hand, much of the conflict in this novel takes place not in the village streets and farms but in Sarah's head, and she is a highly conflicted young woman. Strapped to earth, she longs for heaven. Sensual by nature, she yearns to "let go of [her] woman's body, its frailty and desire." Striving to obey her rule, she turns away a starving leper and hardens her heart against a girl in serious trouble.

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LaVonne Neff is an editor and writer who blogs at *Lively Dust*.

Self-discipline turns into self-mutilation. Anorexia follows, along with hallucinations. Sarah's joints ache, her teeth loosen, she bruises easily. "I hadn't thought suffering would be like this," she muses, "so ordinary, so dull, and so endless." In the chosen darkness of her cell, she begins to dream of gardens in the sun.

OK then, *The Anchoress* must be literary fiction!

Yes, if *literary* means that the story includes a lot of cogitation and involves no car chases and that the writing style is elegant and evocative. It can't be easy writing a novel about 18 months in the life of a girl who never leaves her room. Yet Cadwallader, who has taught creative writing and published numerous poems and short stories, tells Sarah's story in a way that is often sensual, occasionally suspenseful, and gripping from start to finish.

Less concisely, then, this book is an unusually accurate historical-romantic-

literary novel with an underlying didactic current.

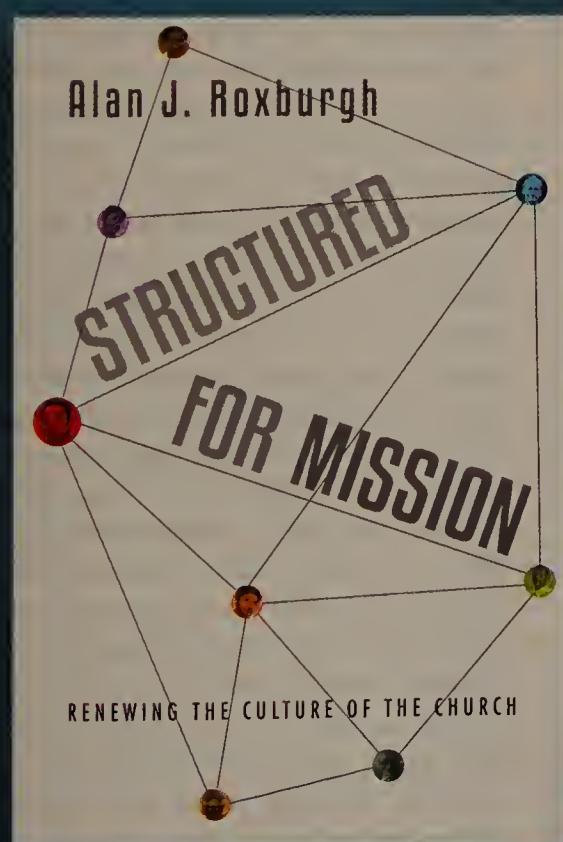
Despite her choice to focus on spiritual things in darkness and isolation, Sarah can't keep the physical world at bay. Sunlight sneaks under the maids' door. Neighbors bring well-seasoned food. Her senses awaken to previously ignored sounds and smells. A persistent cat adopts her, and a fearless bird builds a nest in the thatch of her roof. Even a hair shirt does not keep her from having a mystical—and frankly erotic—experience.

And then, just before her fierce asceticism is about to take her life, village women insist on nursing her back to health, and Sarah begins to notice what she's been missing. "How had I walked about in the world for so many years," she wonders, "and not been aware that its smell and its shape could knock my feet out from beneath me?" She knows she can't continue seeking safety in darkness, but what will she do?

Though Cadwallader never preaches and only rarely lets her characters do so, her message is clear: holiness comes not from escaping the world but from taking the enormous risk of involving oneself in it, body and soul. "Blood and pain and bodies," Sarah says to herself. "I looked at the crucifix above my altar as if for the first time, at the almond-shaped wound, the drops of blood. Where else was I so like Christ but in this body?"

If this attitude sounds more like contemporary America than medieval England, we may be underestimating our foremothers' gutsiness. St. Margaret—the subject of Sarah's favorite book as well as Cadwallader's dissertation—is both a virgin and a dragon slayer. And in spite of rampant misogyny in their homes, village, and church, there are a lot of brave women in *The Anchoress*. By the end of the story, Sarah has become one of them.

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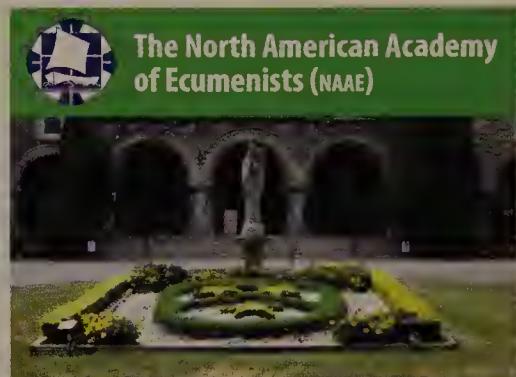
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## American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church

By Alex Beam

Public Affairs, 352 pp., \$16.99 paperback

Americans pride themselves on living in a nation founded on the principles of religious freedom—a country in which competing denominations live or die on the basis of the persuasiveness of their message, unmolested by external prejudice. Religious intolerance, in many Americans' view, is something only people in other nations experience.

The story of Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church, challenges this narrative. The Mormons' Illinois neighbors responded to the religion promulgated by Smith—with its ancient golden plates that produced new scripture, the modern appearance of angels who bestowed

ecclesial authority, and the introduction of a polygamous practice that boldly assaulted Victorian domestic attitudes—not by allowing the religion to die of natural causes in the marketplace of ideas, but by violently lynching its founder. How could the land of religious freedom witness the killing of someone who was simply promulgating religious beliefs, even if they were odious?

Alex Beam, a veteran journalist with the *Boston Globe*, tells this important story in *American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church*. The book covers the religious and cultural context of Joseph Smith's city on a hill, Nauvoo, founded on the western edge of Illinois in the 1840s. Beam's account of Smith's theological teachings and sexual exploits both spice up the narrative and establish the context of the events that led to Smith's death. Non-Mormon residents of Hancock County were worried that

Smith might ascend to political power, disseminate his heretical beliefs further, and steal vulnerable women, and they reacted firmly and zealously to what they perceived as the growing Mormon threat. Smith's decision to destroy a press that his opponents were using to expose his actions gave them the grounds for eradicating him once and for all. Once he was jailed in the county seat of Carthage, a mob stormed the building and killed the prophet, then retreated to prepare for a Mormon retaliatory strike that never came.

A year later, with Mormon witnesses refusing to participate in court proceedings and state prosecutors consistently bungling arguments, the leaders of the mob got off scot-free. Though an official reason for the acquittal was given, the general thinking was that it would be unfair to punish a few for acting on the wishes of the many. In spite of this animosity, the Mormon Church continued to grow, though it was now plagued with schisms that followed Smith's death, and the Latter-day Saints turned their eyes westward toward the Utah territory, where they would eventually settle and where Mormonism would develop into a global faith.

There are no heroes in Beam's tale, on either the Mormon or the non-Mormon side of the story. This is a tale of flawed, sometimes two-dimensional figures struggling to gather support or invoke hostility. Perhaps the most pathetic figure is Thomas Ford, who seems overmatched by his job as governor of Illinois at the time of Smith's killing. Beam lays a substantial amount of blame for the conflicts of 1844 at the feet of the inept Ford, who was unable to marshal enough control over his state's citizens to avoid an event that was wholly avoidable. And although Mormon citizens of Nauvoo certainly stoked the flames of conflict with their heretical beliefs and alarming actions, the jealous neighbors in the surrounding Hancock County towns arouse no sympathy,

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Reviewed by Benjamin E. Park, who teaches history at the University of Missouri and is a fellow with the Kinder Forum on Constitutional Democracy and associate editor of the Mormon Studies Review.

either. This wasn't a battle between the good guys and the bad guys as much as a *Lord of the Flies*-style struggle for power on the fringes of America's western frontier.

Although Beam's prose sparkles and his narrative moves swimmingly, his overreliance on secondary sources weakens his argument, which is riddled with interpretive holes. Furthermore, Beam rarely fleshes out the motivations of the book's characters, who rarely appear as three-dimensional figures. Everyone, Mormon and non-Mormon, is stumbling about with misplaced desires, faulty assumptions, a drinking problem, and a general inability to do anything good, inspiring, or correct. I am a fan of warts-and-all history, but I become bored with all-is-warts history. It is difficult to gather not only why so many people were devoted to Smith, but also why their neighbors would want to attack them with murderous rage. Did antebellum Illinoisans of all stripes have no choice but to either support or defame delinquent figures with no rhyme or reason?

Other than the chapter on polygamy and Beam's quixotic ventures into exotic topics that add spice to the tale, the bulk of the book is remarkably pro-Mormon. Especially concerning the events surrounding Smith's murder, Beam largely follows the narrative provided by Mormon sources. In the chapters that lead up to Smith's martyrdom, the story line rarely departs from the standard telling in the *Documentary History of the Church*, an account written by Mormon Church authorities in the 1850s. This is ironic: Beam expresses skepticism about religion in general, but gives more trust to reminiscent Mormon sources than most Mormon scholars do these days.

A generous reading of this dynamic is that Beam is after a good story that is cleanly told, provocative, and engaging. In this sense *American Crucifixion* is a success. I found the book an engrossing read that makes the final months of Joseph Smith's life a relevant story for American history and for a general audience. Beam reminds us that religious intolerance is neither a new problem in the United States nor an easy one to solve.

## An Introduction to Design Arguments

By Benjamin C. Jantzen

Cambridge University Press, 347 pp.,  
\$29.99 paperback

The argument from design for the existence of God has been around a long time—since Cicero in the first century, according to Benjamin Jantzen. Surprisingly, though, that leaves a couple of millennia of recorded history before Cicero—including all of Old Testament times—when no one appealed to apparent design in nature as an argument for the existence of God. Jantzen's explanation for this is interesting: the first step in the development of design arguments is the recognition that there are unintelligent, inanimate causes.

In the ancient world nature was understood to be full of gods who were causal agents. There really was no distinction between natural and supernatural causation. Arguing from design in that environment would be like arguing with a fish for the existence of water. The ancients were surrounded by what they took to be the action of intelligent agents—from the rising of the sun, to the production of crops, to sickness and health. Before design arguments could even be considered, "someone had to raise the serious possibility that other causes of structure and change are operative in the world besides those we identify with life and mind." Once natural causes become an option for explaining what we see, we had to ask whether those natural causes were responsible, or whether something beyond nature had to intervene. Design arguments depend on our ability to discern the difference.

Most of us have a powerful intuition that various parts of the natural world show purpose, order, or providence. The trick, though, is to take that intuition and

Reviewed by J. B. Stump, who works for the BioLogos Foundation and teaches philosophy at Bethel College in Indiana. He is the editor, with Alan Padgett, of *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity* and author of the forthcoming *Science and Christianity: An Introduction to the Issues*.

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transform it into rigorous and compelling arguments. Benjamin Jantzen has done a marvelous job at analyzing the many attempts at such transformations. He is consistently able to drill down into the arguments and clearly reveal the key, often unstated, claims on which the success of an argument depends.

Jantzen organizes all of the design arguments through the ages into four basic types: arguments from order, purpose, providence, and analogy. All appeal to empirical evidence that suggests some sort of divine agency, but it is helpful to see their nuances clearly distinguished so we don't fall prey to common misconceptions and misrepresentations. For example, it is widely reported that David Hume convincingly refuted the design argument in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* before William Paley wrote his classic formulation of a design argument. But Hume's criticisms are famously against the analogical form of the design argument, while Paley's version is best understood as an argument

from purpose. Objections can still be made against Paley, but they are different from Hume's objections.

In the first half of the book, Jantzen outlines many other interesting treatments of design arguments throughout history. But for many readers the most important and helpful part will be the large section on the contemporary intelligent design movement. It is a curious omission that there is no treatment at all of intelligent design's currently most prominent figure, Stephen Meyer. His books *Signature in the Cell* (2009) and *Darwin's Doubt* (2013) have become the leading edge of the movement. I suspect that Meyer's work came along too late in the development of Jantzen's book, which is clearly the fruit of many years of engagement with the material. It is regrettable, though, that what aims to be a comprehensive treatment of design arguments does not include the most important contemporary exemplar.

Previously the most prominent figure in the ID movement was Michael

Behe. In his argument for irreducible complexity Behe appeals to natural structures that have many different parts and perform a certain task, like causing the blood to clot or propelling bacteria. He argues that it wouldn't be possible to complete such a task without all the parts functioning together; therefore evolution, which works through gradual accretions, can't account for such structures. So, Behe claims, there must be a supernatural designer who brought about these irreducibly complex structures.

The idea of irreducible complexity has had remarkable intuitive staying power among ID followers, but when the intuition is converted into an argument, it has considerably less persuasive force. First, almost all biologists think Behe is wrong about the specific examples of structures that he says are unexplainable by evolution. But most people's intuition is guided by a caricature of how evolution works. They think that each structure or trait develops in isolation. In reality, natural selection operates on combinations of traits, not merely on isolated structures. Half-developed wings won't help an insect fly, but they might help it do other things that contribute to its survival, like skim across the surface of water. Contrary to the ID claim about irreducible complexity, you don't have to get the whole thing at once.

Of course, there are many things we don't yet understand about evolutionary history. So if Behe were to produce an example of an irreducibly complex structure for which scientists had no compelling evolutionary account, would that be enough to generate the conclusion that it must have been designed? No, says Jantzen; there is another problem with the argument. When Behe claims that irreducible complexity is best explained by a designer, Jantzen reminds us that *best* is a comparative term and can only mean "best among the known explanations." If history is any guide here, we should expect that we don't yet know all the possible explanations, so Behe's claim is considerably weakened.

Jantzen treats other forms of contemporary design arguments with equal deftness. In his estimation, none of these reaches the level of being "entirely com-

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pelling." He thinks the fine-tuning arguments have the most going for them, but ultimately their success depends on abstruse metaphysical arguments about the nature of law, explanation, and possible worlds about which there is no consensus. The arguments are much trickier than the simple intuition of design we have when we see beautifully ordered and purposeful natural objects. Time and again I found myself agreeing with the criticisms Jantzen offered, and by the end I almost felt sorry for design advocates as the soft underbelly of their arguments was exposed.

However, I wish that Jantzen had stepped back from examining specific arguments and reflected more systematically on the enterprise of using science to prove the existence of God. Perhaps this is the real problem with design arguments. Science became so spectacularly successful during the 17th and 18th centuries by limiting itself to what we today call natural causes. Recognizing impersonal causes was the necessary first step for design arguments to get off the ground. But now the arguments that attempt to draw theological conclusions from scientific premises are confusing the boundaries that scientists have come to respect.

Of course, there are naturalists who assert that scientific inquiry exhausts all of reality and that the failure of scientific methods to detect God shows there is no God. But there are plenty of first-rate scientists who recognize that the natural sciences are the wrong kind of tool for detecting God and who draw no theological conclusions from the failure of scientific proofs. If a fishing crew uses a net with two-inch holes to trawl a lake and only catches fish that are larger than two inches, they don't conclude that there are no fish smaller than two inches in the lake.

The ID camp does a disservice to the predominantly conservative Christian community to which it appeals by conditioning that community to mistrust science. Its arguments depend on accepted, settled science getting things wrong. So now an alarming number of Christians also reject the conclusions of scientific experts on climate change and vaccines. Of course experts make mistakes. The

trick is to realize that they can be trustworthy as well as fallible.

Instead of attempting to exploit the insufficiencies of science to prove the existence of God, perhaps the more constructive approach is to look at the natural world in the light of faith. We see God's hand throughout the created order not because science can't explain nature, but because it can. The Designer's mark is not in systems that don't work quite right and need tinkering; those are signs of imperfection. Scientists—whether Christians or not—who uncover the inner workings of nature are the ones who learn something of the mind of God.

### Something Rich and Strange: Selected Stories

By Ron Rash  
HarperCollins, 434 pp., \$27.99

Ron Rash delivers what he promises: something rich and strange. Each of these 34 stories, covering about 150 years in the life of a corner of the Smokey Mountains near the North Carolina-Tennessee border, gazes steadily into the mysteries of human lives and choices.

Each story is slight in itself: the characters emerge from the landscape and disappear as quickly as they come. There are Civil War widows and meth orphans, abandoned lovers and grieving mothers, people trying to make something of their lives and people trying to undermine their lives. No matter how dark their circumstances, the protagonists often reach for a mystery beyond their own understanding.

In one story, a child finds a downed plane in the mountains and is drawn to it again and again, keeping company with the dead, not speaking of what he has found. In another story, a man slashes his wife's tires while she is at a college class and struggles to make sense of this rash act and what it will cost him.

The source of these stories seems to

Reviewed by Amy Frykholm, associate editor.

be wondering rather than knowing. While Rash carefully observes life, he doesn't pretend to understand it. His stories often leave the reader with more questions than answers, and the questions can be profoundly disturbing: Why did that young man withdraw all of his money from an ATM and leave it on his meth-addicted girlfriend's table? Was Marcie right to take Carl, a lonely drifter, as her lover and husband? Will Lauren's family succeed in tearing down what she and Matt have built?

With so many unanswered questions and moral ambiguities, and so many characters, it is astonishing that the accumulated effect is novelistic. The reader seems to be following one story. Perhaps the common feature of the landscape contributes to this perception. The mountains contain the stories, comment on them, exceed them, and preside over them.

The stories also explore the same territory in the human heart. The characters keep secrets and reveal them, reach out to each other and then withdraw in a dance that seems both timeless and immediate.

This collection demonstrates Rash's linguistic, historical, and moral range. He takes us on a wild journey deep into the heart of this Carolina wilderness. We might not be comfortable with what we find there, but the trip is well worth the price of admission.

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## Public intimacy

In May Jimmy Fallon and the band U2 staged a prank in a New York City subway station (it can be viewed on YouTube). Producers of *The Tonight Show* disguised U2 and Fallon with dime-store phony mustaches, hair, and glasses. Fallon faked a New York accent and told commuters passing by that these “local artists” would play for birthday parties and bar mitzvahs and that the buskers needed some “moneys.” Bono, dressed only slightly more ridiculously than usual, reared back and started to croon, sans microphone, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” Drummer Larry Mullen beat on plastic buckets with sticks. Guitarist the Edge and bassist Adam Clayton played guitars that looked like they were from the closet in the church youth room.

People started to gawk before the end of the first stanza. A crowd gathered. Fallon said, “This isn’t working. Plan B,” and the group shed their disguises and ripped into the much more energetic “Desire.” By now the onlookers realized that they were getting something millionaires can’t buy: a concert two feet from Bono. They pulled out their cell phones and filmed themselves being filmed with U2, while Bono, ever the showman, hammed it up for them. It was hackneyed and manufactured, yet fun. Fallon had meant to create anonymity, but instead he created intimacy and spontaneous community.

I felt a similar dynamic at play in a more uncomfortable way at a recent funeral in our community. A 21-year-old had lost control of a new motorcycle and hit a truck head-on. His family members were celebrities in this small community: musical and political, they were loved. Everybody came to the funeral, and we

watched as the boy’s parents said goodbye to him. It was an unbearably intimate moment, and the public couldn’t turn away and couldn’t stop crying. His mother touched his hair and bent to kiss him. His father buckled in agony. The coffin would soon close, and they’d never lay eyes on their boy’s body this side of the resurrection.

The family didn’t shy away from its celebrity. The boy’s mother spoke, giving testimony to her faith in the face of death. She sang with her bluegrass band and concluded by thanking God for her boy’s life. In my mind, her song was more beautiful than Bono’s.

We were watching a family live its grief, and I felt the same gratitude and surprise that I might feel if I discovered Bono on a street corner, but also the deep discomfort. Watching was agony and made me question the whole enterprise of public funerals. There are no witnesses to the intimacies that conceive children. The public doesn’t ordinarily view the last moments of life for any of

us. Why should I have witnessed this mother’s touch of his shock of brown hair for the last time?

The ceremony’s intimacy had an entirely different quality than Fallon’s prank, of course, but during a few moments of the funeral, I was afraid we had turned the family’s grief into a spectacle. At my best moments, I felt honored to be a part of it and intensely connected to my community.

In both instances, a community was formed through ritual and shared experience. In both, the word *watching* doesn’t even begin to capture the experience. St. Augustine calls the sacraments *magna spectacula*, great spectacles. But their greatness is largely concealed. To our eyes the elements look like ordinary bread, wine, water, oil, or words. But in God’s mysterious economy they become things that save. The wonder is that they look so ordinary. Yet they are drenched with God’s Spirit. We gather to try to “see” what can’t be seen. And to become part of it.



**SUBWAY SURPRISE:** Bono (center) and his U2 band perform unannounced at the NYC subway stop underneath Grand Central.

The author is Jason Byassee, who teaches homiletics at Vancouver School of Theology.

by Philip Jenkins

**O**ver the past three years, a major church scandal has unfolded in the island state of Singapore (literally, the “Lion City”). The target of investigation is the mighty City Harvest megachurch, which claims more than 20,000 adherents. Founding pastor Kong Hee has been accused of diverting at least \$20 million to support his wife’s pop music career. Several other church leaders have been implicated in alleged cover-ups.

At first sight such a scandal might seem unremarkable. Sadly, clergy on all continents sometimes fail to live up to their principles, and churches often lack accountability.

What is astonishing is the existence of megachurches in Singapore, and their enormous popularity. This fact challenges much of what we commonly think we know about the nature of Christianity outside its traditional Euro-American heartlands. It also raises basic questions about the process of secularization.

Christianity is thriving in Singapore. Since 1980, the number of reported Christians has roughly doubled to about 20 percent of the state’s 5.5 million people. About a third of those Christians are Roman Catholic; most of the remainder are charismatics and evangelicals.

As in many great Asian cities, the most conspicuous symbol of that expansion is the megachurch. Besides City Harvest, Singapore is home to New Creation Church,

## Megachurches in Singapore

which has over 30,000 members; Faith Community Baptist, with 12,000; Victory Family Centre; and the Covenant Evangelical Free Church. As the names suggest, such churches would be very familiar to anyone who knows the structure and worship style of charismatic or evangelical groups in North America or around the Pacific Rim. They combine prosperity teachings with lively, vibrant services, all to the tune of cutting-edge contemporary music.

With superstar pastor Joseph Prince, the fast-growing New Creation fits every stereotype of the expanding megachurch. It offers a wide range of media activities and is deeply involved in commercial and entrepreneurial investments. Immensely strengthened by the practice of tithing, these churches have become a huge economic force. New Creation’s main sanctuary, with its spaceship architecture, proclaims success and glitz modernity.

This Christian presence matters because Singapore is an influential center of wealth and media power for the Pacific Rim and the Chinese diaspora. And Prince has launched revivals and crusades in the United States itself. What happens in the Lion City does not stay there.

Most of the usual explanations for Christian expansion

in Asia fall flat in the case of Singapore. Do we imagine a community of the very poor seeking consolation for the rapid economic changes reshaping their lives, looking for spiritual opium to make their lives tolerable? To the contrary, Singapore is one of the world’s richest societies, one of the four Asian Dragons that have dominated the Pacific Rim’s economy since the 1960s. By conventional measures such as GDP per capita, it usually counts in the top five wealthiest countries worldwide, alongside Arab Gulf nations. In some countries, churches fulfill many functions left by weak or unstable governments, but the state in Singapore is a powerful and efficient presence.

Nor should we think of churches growing in backward country areas under the shadow of the booming city. Much smaller in area than Rhode Island, Singapore is a pure city-state with no rural areas whatever. Literacy is close to 100 percent, and English is widely spoken. Those booming megachurches are more likely to attract astute financial planners than confused peasants.

Other likely predictors of faith are likewise absent. Normally, low fertility rates and small family size corre-

late nicely with secularization, and Singapore is one of the world’s least fertile societies, producing far fewer children even than Western Europe. Secularism does indeed have its followers, and one-sixth of Singaporeans espouse no religion whatever. Multiple religions, though, continue to thrive, with the growth of Christian numbers the most impressive aspect of the story.

I don’t have an answer as to why Singapore defies so many assumptions about Christian growth. Perhaps the Americanized megachurch ethos appeals to upwardly mobile groups fascinated by progress and modernity. Most of the recent Christian growth has been at the expense of Buddhism, which perhaps seems too traditional, too much the religion of the grandparents. Undoubtedly too, such congregations offer a sense of community and extended family of a kind that is cherished amidst all the torrid consumerist growth. City Harvest in particular draws heavily on young singles.

Perhaps we are just wrong to seek elaborate cultural explanations for faith. Perhaps the people attending those churches just hear there a message that they believe and that makes sense of their lives.

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*Philip Jenkins's next book is The Many Faces of Christ: The Thousand-Year Story of the Survival and Influence of the Lost Gospels.*

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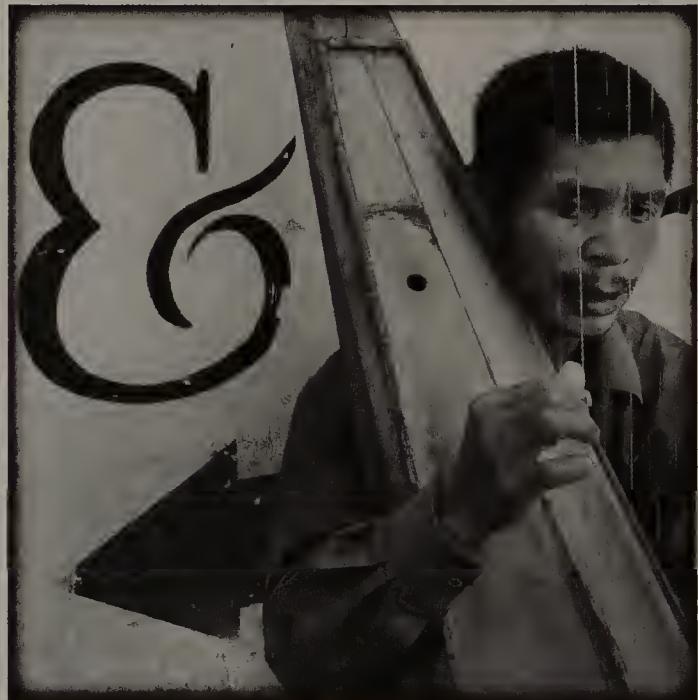
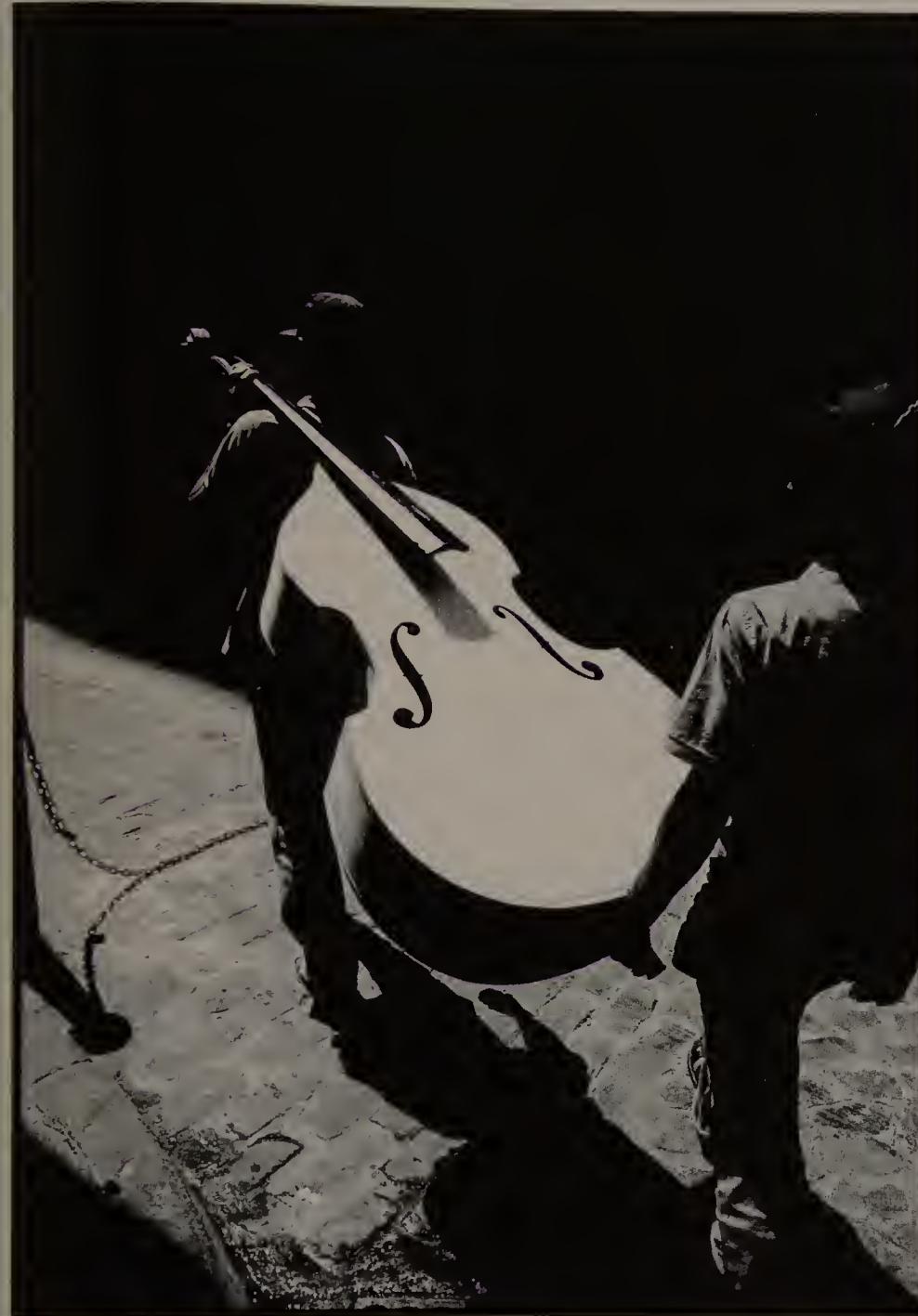
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# ON Art



*In Honor of the Cuban People, Who Have a Generous and Warm Spirit and Who Make Music That Moves the Soul (Havana, 1997); String Theory/Parallel Lines; In Accord, by Eric Mencher*

If those who sing pray twice, perhaps creators of artwork about music pray thrice. Eric Mencher's works are photographic explorations that often create a sense of sacred space. "I'm definitely attracted to Latino culture, history, and life. In Guatemala, there is an amazing confluence of Maya, Catholic, and evangelical traditions. It is vibrant and colorful and sometimes somber, but always energetic. I hope that my photos are true to the people, speak to the specific, but resonate with those from many different worlds."

*Art selection and comment by Lil Copan, a painter and editor.*

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